

and you may ask yourself by lymricks

Series: [you'll lose the blues in Chicago \[3\]](#)

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Summary:

Billy had known the second he'd walked into the cafe that this was the right choice, that this was the conversation they were going to have, but it still makes him ache a little to watch the expressions Harrington is definitely trying to hide flit across his face. "I--" Harrington starts, "Why?"

A year, one month, and right around two weeks after the police station, Steve has a secret plan to host Christmas. Billy takes a trip back to Hawkins.

1. Chicago

Author's Note:

There are two fics that come before this one in the series! It'll stand alone just fine, though, I think. You just need to know that the first two took place three years post show, and this one jumps another year.

Everyone's responses have been literally so wonderful, I can't even explain it. Thank you!!! Here's a Christmas fic that'll have a happy ending, I promise.

A year is a long time, that's what Steve's thinking as he sits at the kitchen table in the new apartment, the one that is theirs. Outside, the Chicago sky is dropping snowflakes all over the city, has been for hours. It's a light snow, too cold to be anything more, but it's crisp and beautiful. When Steve crawled out onto the fire escape a few hours ago, he blew on the snow at the edges and it floated away. Just like the snow inside of a snowglobe.

Now he's sitting at the table in their kitchen--*their* kitchen, because a year is a long time and the apartment is new and everything feels comfortable. Steve has his feet up on the only chair that doesn't match. He couldn't get rid of it when they moved, a thousand images of Billy tipping it over and over and over again, of the two of them tipping it over together, flashing behind his eyelids. Billy had rolled his eyes when Steve said he wanted to keep just the one, but there had been something fond on his face too.

Billy has unfurled over the last year. He hasn't lost the tension that thrums at his core, and Steve knows he might never. There's a softness at the edges of him now, though, and it seems to grow every day. And Steve loves him as he has never loved anything. It is desperate sometimes, and messy sometimes, but also warm, and comfortable, and Steve isn't afraid of it. Steve thinks that Billy might never uncoil all the way, but he knows that he himself won't ever be the same, either. The changes aren't all bad, although he could do without a day like today, where the snow outside is beautiful and

Steve is sitting in the kitchen with too many lights on.

Days like this still come, a little unexpected and always unwelcome. Steve handles them better now than he did a year ago. It's easier when he isn't alone. He still calls Nancy, sometimes, but he hasn't today. Mostly he watches the clock and sips his--Jesus, fifth? sixth? --cup of coffee, and thinks that it's probably adding to his jitters. He wonders if the two opposites cancel out, if the calming routine of sipping a warm mug of coffee is undermined by the caffeine that makes him roll his shoulders and try to crack his neck.

Sounds on the stairs come suddenly. Thump, thump, thump. Steve jumps and wishes he could just have more days, infinite days that aren't--this.

The door swings open and Steve's eyes are glued to it: anticipation, nerves, hope.

"Hey," Billy greets him, stepping into the apartment and brushing snow off his shoulders. Steve tightens his fingers around his mug of coffee and tips his face back, expectant. Billy toes his boots off by the door--house rules--and pads across the kitchen in his socks to lean down and kiss Steve. His lips are cold. Steve feels something in his chest get a little looser.

Billy straightens up, and it would be casual if Steve didn't know him, but Steve can see the way Billy notices the mug of coffee, how warm it is in the kitchen, the lights on even in the bedroom. It's been a year, one month, and something around two weeks since Steve strolled into a police station looking for Dustin and brought Billy home instead. Steve still marvels, sometimes, at how much Billy cares to notice the details.

Billy leans down again, kisses him a little softer, a question in it. "How was work?" Steve asks instead of answering. He tangles his fingers in Billy's snow-damp curls, keeps him close. It's been a long and tired day. He's glad to know he's not alone in the house anymore. Gladder still that he's not alone in the house because Billy's here.

"Busy," Billy answers, and he bumps his nose against Steve's before

catching Steve's wrist and gently tugging until Steve lets go of his hair. Billy stands again, presses his fingertips against Steve's shoulder and says, sort of absentmindedly, "People are trying to make sure they have the right tires and whatever before they go ho--" Billy stops suddenly, looks out the window. A beat, a correction. "Away. For the holidays."

Steve takes a sip of his coffee and waits Billy out. For all they go back to Hawkins to see Steve's termites and family and to sleep in Steve's childhood bed. For all his mother fusses quietly about Billy and his father calls Billy his *friend* in such a pointed tone that Steve has to hold back a laugh--his dad is trying, it's so weird, but he's trying--Billy never actually says that they go home for the holidays. In fact, Steve is reasonably sure he's never heard Billy actually say the phrase *home for the holidays* except that one time in the bedroom of the old apartment when he'd sneered it at Steve.

He always goes to Hawkins with Steve, though. For Easter, and the fourth of July--to see fireworks over the quarry that Hopper set off and almost killed everyone with, to see Steve catch Dustin trying to drink his beer, and to see Max had laugh and laugh. For a few birthdays, and for Thanksgiving. Billy always makes the trip with Steve, even though going back to Hawkins is a weight for him, something that is tumultuous and disorienting. They've never seen Neil since that time Steve saw him in the store. Steve is thankful for that. He's pretty sure that Billy hasn't talked to his father in just under a year, although he doesn't ask. It's the kind of thing that Billy should offer, Steve thinks.

Steve watches Billy brush off the slip up the same way he'd just brushed off the snow. His shoulders drop and his face smoothes and then he looks at Steve, looks at the light, looks at the coffee, all very pointed. He leans his hip against the table and keeps looking at Steve, something knowing at the corner of his mouth, one eyebrow kind of raised.

"I'm fine," Steve says. It's only half a lie.

"You aren't," Billy answers, reaching out to card his fingers through Steve's hair. He tips Steve's head back and holds his gaze, frowning now. Then he lets go and walks away, a foot of distance between him

as he reaches for the fridge.

Steve leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, pulls his feet down so they're planted on the floor. "Ok," he says, a little heat at the edges of it, annoyed at himself and annoyed at Billy and frustrated that he's so fucking annoyed and probably so fucking annoying. "I'm not fine. Now fucking what?"

"I was thinking dinner," Billy says, resting his hand against the freezer door.

"Oh." Steve feels a little sheepish, suddenly, like someone's popped the balloon in his chest. "Dinner sounds uh--good."

Billy smiles at him, quick and--Steve doesn't even know what to call it, so intimate, so Billy, the Billy whom Steve has come to know and love over this last, ridiculous year of their lives, and that smile is fucking everything, even as on edge as he is, it's a smile that is full of home.

Billy smiles at him and then pulls a tupperware of soup out of the freezer to heat up.

That this moment can be that easy, in a way, is fucking crazy, Steve thinks, watching Billy at the stove. He still has these terrible days sometimes, and they're less frequent, but they aren't gone. Billy carries the weight of his shit differently than Steve does, he always has, and he's such a saint on Steve's bad days that by the end of them Steve mostly doesn't feel embarrassed.

Billy walks a tightrope for him, all the time, this perfect balance between blunt (when Steve lies) and gentle (when Steve's jumpy).

They have a big kitchen window now, in this apartment that's theirs, and Steve admires the way the light from the snow outside frames Billy as he stirs the melting, reheating soup--from Lucas's mom, they've been saving it, she's such a good cook---on the stove. Steve moves toward Billy like he's a magnet, like Steve can't stop himself.

"Bread?" Billy asks, turning to look at him, seeming a bit surprised when Steve is *right there*.

"I love you," Steve says, because he can. Billy's facing him now, something a little cautious on his face, like he's trying to find his balance on that tightrope. Steve leans down, bends a little so that he can press his face into Billy's shoulder. He feels Billy's arms come around his waist and Steve sinks into it. Billy hums something against the top of Steve's head and Steve nods against him. Billy doesn't say it out loud much, doles it out in random, vehement doses when he really needs to say it. Steve doesn't need to hear it every time. Knows it as a truth either way.

"I gotta stir the soup, Harrington," Billy says after a little while. He puts his hands on Steve's hips, pinches a little, pushes him gently away.

"Mrmph," Steve says, turning his face resolutely into Billy's neck. His skin is cold, still, and Steve chases that chill, pressing closer.

Billy slides chilly palms up under Steve's sweater and Steve squirms, protesting in a whine even as he finally steps back. "Sorry," Steve says, and Billy shrugs, checks Steve lightly with his hip before turning back to the soup. Steve steps up next to him, not quite touching, stands at the stove and watches the soup turn from frozen and cracking to warm and bubbling.

He can feel Billy watching him as they both watch the soup, feel each time Billy sort of turns his head to look at Steve out of the corner of his eye. He won't say anything else about Steve's mood until Steve does--part of the tightrope act, of giving Steve normal until he needs something else. Steve always would rather try and ride his own bullshit out, and too much mothering always leads to a fight, and Billy's good at this now. He lets Steve stay close and doesn't comment. Steve doesn't even feel stupid for the clinginess, not really.

They haven't talked about everything. There's government contracts that keep Steve from telling the full story, but he thinks he'll probably tell it anyway, someday. Steve doesn't worry about Billy's impermanence anymore. They've become the kind of good for each other Nancy had predicted at Easter. It isn't easy, fuck, it's never going to be easy all the time, but it is a lot of the time, and it's a lot of work, and it's enough. Steve's learning to tell Billy when he doesn't know how to really say what's about to come out of his mouth. Billy's

learned to listen to the whole sentence before he decides whether or not he's going to feel something about it.

It isn't that they don't fight. They do, sometimes, but about stuff that seems small and isn't. They're big fucking fights, too. In August, Steve slept on the couch for a week because he wouldn't get into bed with Billy after Billy had a nightmare and snapped at Steve about something, and Steve was so pissed about it because he'd just wanted to help, and Billy had thought Steve was being stupid and so he'd slept on the *floor* next to the couch until Steve threw his hands in the air and said the fight was stupid and Billy had said, "That's what I've been trying to tell you *all week*, look, I'm fucking sorry all right?" It's a funny story, now, and Steve's so glad about it.

Steve's staring out the window at the snow like a snowglobe and rocking on his heels, thinking about all the times they've had weird fights when Billy says, "Soup's done," and Steve realizes he's really been spacing out. Billy skims his fingers over Steve's shoulders, the touch a little anchoring, before he fills two bowls with soup and sets them on the table. Steve had forgotten to get bread. He feels a little guilty about it.

Steve drops down into his seat and wraps his fingers around the warm bowl. Today has left him wrung out and tired. He didn't have work or Billy around to keep him busy, and it's been months since Steve slept with the tv on, but he thinks he might want to tonight. Even as he's trying to loosen up, there's this tight coil of something like panic clawing at his stomach. He's been keeping it at bay most of the day, but as his chest loosens and he remembers to breathe, as Billy moves around him, it's harder to stash it away. Something in Billy makes him honest with himself.

"Harrington," Billy's saying, Steve registers his voice, but he's still looking down into his soup. "Steve, hey," Billy says, then, a little more concerned, "Babe?" and Steve looks up sharply, realizes he's spaced out again.

"Sorry," he says, feels his ears burn and his cheeks flush.

"Want to talk about--"

"No," Steve cuts him off, then, "No, shit, sorry. I mean--I don't have anything to talk about? I just feel--off--today."

"All right," Billy says, wary, still eyeing Steve.

Steve looks back down into his bowl of soup and waits for it to cool. He watches the steam rise, smelling like sage, and tries to loosen the knots in his spine and kill the thing in his stomach. Billy watches him for a while, and they don't talk while they eat. Billy tries a few times, but Steve is *enjoying his soup*, ok? And working really hard to *project normalcy* and it takes a lot of effort to do it, so he gives one word answers until Billy gives up.

After they both finish, Steve does the dishes while Billy packs up the remaining soup into smaller containers so they can both take it to work for lunch tomorrow. It's horribly domestic, and Steve is going to feel so warm and fuzzy about it later, is going to whisper it to Nancy over the phone and blush when he feels less like this. Steve turns around, drying his hands on a dishrag, and offers something like a smile to Billy. "I'm just gonna--" he says, looking toward the living room and making a sort of cleaning motion.

"No," Billy says, half a sigh, "You aren't," he reaches out and catches Steve around the wrist, tugs once. "C'mere, Harrington."

Steve has been touch starved, on edge all day, and so he lets Billy pull him into his chest, lets himself be led into the bedroom, lets Billy turn the lights off and tug his clothes off until Steve's crawling into bed in just his briefs. They've pushed the bed up against the wall, even though it would make more sense to have two sides. Steve likes to sleep between Billy and the wall because it makes him feel safe, helps him sleep through the night, and Billy gets it.

Steve keeps a little distance between them once they're in bed, plays with Billy's fingers. "I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me," he whispers, feeling vulnerable and annoyed about it in the dark.

"You've been through some shit," Billy says back. "Give yourself a break. Come *here*, dipshit," and Billy turns his hand over in Steve's, tugs, pulling Steve into his chest. Billy smells familiar and his skin is warm, and the bed is soft, and the sounds of the building around

them, the faint creaking and the footsteps, get lost in the sound of Billy's breathing. "Tell me earlier when you feel like this," Billy says against the top of Steve's head. "Call me at work. Don't let it get this bad."

Steve nods into Billy's collarbone and thinks about apologizing, doesn't. He doesn't need to. He listens to Billy breathe, feels the rise and fall of his chest, and slowly--too fucking slowly, but eventually--the thrum beneath his skin settles back down deep into his bones. Steve sleeps.

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"Operation SHC is a go, I repeat, all systems go, over."

"What? Also this is a phone. You don't need to say over."

It's 5:45am and Steve is hunched over the phone in the hallway. He's eyeing the bedroom door and listening carefully for the sounds of Billy waking up, just in case. Billy usually wakes only for a few seconds when Steve slips out of bed in the morning, and this morning Steve had left Billy reaching for him, kind of half-heartedly, already falling back asleep. He'd brushed a kiss across Billy's bare shoulder and grabbed his apron. If Billy wakes up again--and doesn't hear Steve on the phone, anyway--Billy will *hopefully* just assume that Steve has gone to work early or something.

"Operation SHC is a--"

"No, I heard you, I just mean *what?*" Steve hisses. Is that a sound from the bedroom? He squints at the door like he has x-ray vision, trying to see if he's going to run out of time.

"SHC. Steve hosts Christmas. Come on, we agreed on this like, three weeks ago--"

"Dustin. It is 5:45--"

"Ok, ok," Dustin says, and Steve can picture him: the phone cradled between his chin and shoulder, both palms up, placating. "All I am saying, man, is that all parents are on board for the Christmas road trip extravaganza. My mom thinks it's very sweet. I'm being sent to

you with a fruitcake. You're not allowed to share it with any of us, except, obviously, Billy. Lucas's mom is making something too. I'm supposed to find out if you liked the soup--" Dustin pauses for breath, "All our parents love you more than us, but we, Steve-o, are at the point of acceptance and are fully committing to our new job as food delivery service people."

That's--a lot of information. Steve is going to process all of it when he has more coffee and less teenager talking at him. He feels warm all over, like he's doing the best thing ever, except--

"Dustin, hey, Dustin," Steve says suddenly, interrupting Dustin's continued diatribe about the amount of food the termites are bringing--the fridge isn't big enough, what the fuck is Steve going to do with all this food?-- "Dustin," Steve says again, a little firmer. Dustin stops talking, and Steve casts a nervous glance at the bedroom door. This would be the absolute *worst possible moment* for Billy to walk out of the bedroom.

"Steve? Steve-o? Earth to--"

"Yeah. Sorry, buddy," Steve says. "Hey, listen," he adds, urgent suddenly, "Max? Max can come too?"

Dustin makes a little sound like all the breath is rushing out of him, "Not--technically."

Steve groans out loud, then slaps a hand over his mouth, horrified. No sound comes from the bedroom, even though Steve waits a few heartbeats, holding his breath. "Dustin," he says, pinching the bridge of his nose, "What does 'not technically' mean?"

"Her dad was all aboard the nope train," Dustin starts, and Steve thinks that makes a lot of sense, "So Max told her mom that instead she's going to spend Christmas with Nancy, and her mom said that would be ok because Nancy will make Max want to go to a really good college."

Steve blinks. "Nancy--will be--here?"

"I don't think Max shared those particular details with Susan, Steve,"

Dustin says, like he's talking to an idiot.

"I'm going to get arrested for kidnapping," Steve says, sighing loudly.

"No you aren't," Dustin said, "You have an in with the Chicago PD," he pauses, "And also, I know a good lawyer."

Steve doesn't ask.

~

"Shit, sorry I'm so fucking late. This lady *would not* leave," Steve says when he has finally shouldered his way through the crowd of people hovering near the bar to the table in the back that Billy and some of Steve's friends from work claimed when they got there. He's stomping snow off his shoes, the weather hasn't let up in days, and shaking it out of his hair. It's freezing outside.

Billy, sprawled along the bench against the wall, lifts a lazy hand in greeting and Steve grins at him. Billy's either being rude by taking up so much space or being a good boyfriend and Steve's pretty sure it's the latter. It could go either way, though, so he tests the waters, walking around the table and kicking Billy's calf. "Move over," he says, and Billy rolls his eyes but shifts enough so Steve can slide in beside him. "Fuck," Steve whines, once he's settled, "It's fucking cold!" he shoves one frozen hand up under Billy's shirt.

"Harrington!" Billy snaps, pulling away. Steve just grins and scratches lightly at his side before withdrawing his hand. Billy rolls his eyes again.

"Makes you wonder why we all would ever move to Chicago," says Adam, one of the co-workers slash friends, as he walks up, precariously balancing beers for the table. Behind him, Sally and Karen follow, each holding what looks like a basket of fries. Steve's stomach rumbles appreciatively. He accepts a beer from Adam and snatches a fry before the girls even have a chance to put them down.

"I'm from Indiana, man," Steve reminds him, still munching on his fry. "It's this cold there, too. Shoulda moved to fucking Florida."

"What about the boy from California?" Karen asks, a lipstick mark on

the edge of her glass. She grins at Billy, "Couldn't have been this cold there. What were you thinking?"

Steve forgets, sometimes, how long he has been in Chicago and how long he and Billy have been together, and how many little details about them both their friends must know. It makes Billy feel permanent to Steve, which is good, true. Billy feels real and a part of Steve's life outside the four walls of their apartment. Steve can still hear the fights they had, early, early on, when Steve had felt afraid they would only ever be together in the shadow of Hawkins, with the looming threat of both their pasts nipping at their heels, but that hadn't been true.

So Billy comes out with Steve and his friends from the cafe after work, plays the good sport at concerts he probably wouldn't be caught dead at without Steve. Steve goes to concerts that make his ears hurt in people's living rooms and basements. He feels loose and a little out of control at the edges while he's there and he loves it more than he admits. He lets Billy smudge eyeliner on under his eyes, *it's progressive* and *fashionable* says the voice that sounds like Nancy, and Steve hadn't thought Billy and Nancy would be a team, but when it comes to him they make a fantastic one.

Their lives, this year, have blended, and that's great. But also, it lets Karen ask a question like that, a question she cannot know is loaded for Billy, especially at this time of year.

There's a heartbeat where--and Steve is pretty sure he's the only one who sees it--Billy's jaw goes tight and his knuckles go white around his beer.. If Steve fears the impermanence of the unknown, Billy fears the tangibility of being known. This is awfully close to that.

"I like the cold," Billy says finally, after that heartbeat in which Steve imagines a thousand possible, awful responses. "It makes me feel alive." Billy smiles then, sharp and mean like he did in high school, a smile that says *fuck off*. Karen leans back a little bit, tapping her fingers on the glass. Steve wonders if she knows she's doing it, looking nervous like that, but Billy drops the smile like his attention has shifted to something else. It's a ploy, and also a dismissal, but Steve thinks he's probably the only one who notices how deliberately Billy tips his head toward the music, nodding like he loves this song,

like he's not listening to the conversation.

Under the table, Steve presses his knee against Billy's. Billy looks at him, then, the ghost of that smile still on his face, and Steve thinks that there was a time when he would have leaned back from Billy when he looked like this. Now, Steve drops his hand under the table, squeezes Billy's thigh, can't help it, tries to make sure he's saying *I'm right fucking here, you asshole. I got you with every part of his body.* He hopes that Billy's learned enough of his language to know he means it.

"So what are your plans for Christmas?" Steve asks his co-workers, hoping one of them will answer and steer the conversation away from Billy's origin story and toward more neutral ground.

Karen's still kind of watching Billy, which Steve wishes she would stop doing, but he knows that she's mostly just curious. She answers. "My parents always do a big thing," she explains, "So I'm flying home. It's so weird to be a big girl now! Gone are the days of college, languishing on my parents' couch for days while they baby me. You know how it is," she heaves a dramatic sigh and laughs.

Next to Steve, Billy keeps doing that great impression of pretending he isn't listening. Steve squeezes Billy's thigh again, feels Billy finally kind of deflate next to him. He's not quite leaning into Steve, but it's almost like that. So much for more neutral ground, Steve thinks. Billy is a minefield, and Steve is always careful, but he's never perfect at avoiding explosions.

Adam takes over then, a true saint, really, and dives into a story about his dad setting something on fire last year. He details his excruciatingly long travel plans after. He'll be driving back to his parents' house, it's like twelve hours. Steve wants to die just thinking of being in a car for that long.

"What are you guys doing for Christmas?" Adam asks, once he's finished. He's maybe not actually a saint, Steve thinks, wincing a little.

Billy's tuned back into the conversation, is tapping his fingers on the table. Steve thinks of ruining the surprise of operation SHC, just to

smooth the corners of Billy's mouth out, but says, "We go back to Hawkins," like it's easy. Dustin will be proud he's keeping the real plans clandestine. "I have family there and that kid--Dustin? You've met him actually, Karen. So I always do big holidays with them."

"That sounds lovely," Sally says, "Is your family still there, too, Billy?"

This is such a normal fucking topic of conversation and Steve hates that it isn't one Billy gets to have. He wishes he could make shit easier. It's not fucking fair, Steve thinks, frustrated and sad, that conversations like this exist to remind Billy of all the shit he doesn't have, like a home besides the one he shares with Steve, like a family who loves him. Steve bounces his knee under the table and thinks of Joyce Byers making brussels sprouts for Easter even though they aren't a spring vegetable and everyone hates them, and that's a kind of home and a kind of family, but Steve knows that Billy feels like it isn't *Billy's* the way it is *Steve's*.

He wishes on a star, a penny, a fucking fairy godmother that this conversation could just end so Billy could have a little fun tonight. Steve thinks he deserves a fairy godmother, both of them do. They've been through some shit. But if he's got one, she isn't listening, because nothing he wishes for happens. There's a long, awkward silence after Sally's question, where everyone sips their beers and Billy stares, rigid, somewhere to the left of Sally's head before he finally says, "My step-sister is there," like a peace offering in its honesty.

Steve doesn't know if he has a fairy godmother. He thinks he should. If monsters are fucking real then fairy godmothers should be too. Maybe he does have one, though, because Sally--with the social graces of someone who knows how to recognize a minefield when she sees one says, "Did anyone see the *game* last night?" and the conversation moves on.

Under the table, Billy's hand curls around Steve's, and Steve squeezes it, holds on until Billy lets go.

At the end of the night, Steve is just drunk enough to feel soft and happy at the edges, and Billy keeps bumping into him and laughing

when Steve stumbles as they walk home.

“Do you have a fucking cigarette?” Steve asks, shaking out his frozen fingers and wishing he hadn’t lost his only pair of gloves. It’s December in Chicago. He needs more than one pair.

“I have a regular one,” Billy answers with a big, wolfish smile.

“Fuck you,” Steve mumbles, but then Billy’s passing him a cigarette and stopping Steve, one hand cupped around his shoulder, the other cupped around the flame from his lighter to light it. “I take it back,” Steve says, breathing in and feeling warmer almost instantly. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy says, still smiling at him, quiet.

“You all right?” Steve asks a few minutes later when Billy doesn’t talk. He bumps their shoulders together.

“I’m always fine,” Billy says softly, and there’s something like an edge to it, and the smile he gives Steve is all teeth. Steve looks down at his feet, a little drunk and soft, a little petulant. He thinks that’s not a real answer and he thinks that he doesn’t like it when Billy smiles like that.

They make it home in one piece, and Steve turns the lights off, and they crawl into bed, and they fuck, and then Steve curls into Billy’s chest, feels like an octopus, sleepy and happy and spent.

He wakes up a few hours later, confused, as Billy leans over him. His necklace swings between them like the pendulum of an old clock. “I’m going back out,” Billy whispers, his eyes a darker blue in the faint light coming through the window. He does that, sometimes, and it doesn’t scare Steve anymore that he’s leaving in the middle of the night, even if it makes him sad. He understands it, he thinks. They each handle their shit differently. He peers up at Billy, foggy from sleep, “Stay,” he murmurs, because he always does even though he knows that Billy won’t.

Billy grins again, still all teeth. “Shh, shh,” he soothes, brushes his lips across Steve’s forehead and then looks down at him. There’s

something in his eyes, something old and a little angry. It makes Steve want to wake up, but Billy leans down again, kisses him so gently and slowly that Steve feels like he's melting. He lets his eyes close. Doesn't really even hear the door when Billy leaves.

When he wakes up again, a few hours later, half asleep and still alone, the room too dark around him, he turns a light on. He can still feel the love in that kiss, so he leaves the bedroom light on, doesn't really worry, goes back to sleep. Trusts Billy, because a year is a long time, and Billy's earned it.

2. Hawkins: Part I

Billy, leaning against a shitty little bar in Chicago as churches the city over chime midnight, pictures holidays in the Hargrove household, two ways.

The first: Billy on his back on the floor, his father leaning over him, Max and Susan shut up behind a bedroom door with loud music playing. No one coming to his rescue. His dad looming, calm and angry all at once, dripping disappointment. Billy dripping blood. A swift kick to his ribs, the howl he couldn't keep clenched between his teeth, curling round himself in pain, saying sorry, sorry, sorry, even meaning it. A knock on the door, the neighbors heard it walking by, "We're a little concerned...", Max appears and she's crying, peeking out, a bright red dot against all the white on the walls, Susan's hand darting out, the door shutting. Dragging himself into his bedroom, saying sorry, sorry, sorry over the sound of his father arguing with the neighbors. Leaving California, too many questions. His dad cold and angry because how he chooses to handle his piece of shit son is *his* business, nosey neighbors be damned. Billy driving separate, always trailing the family car a respectable distance, never leaving, not taking the chance.

The second: A year ago in Hawkins, peering through the window, his dad smiling at Max as he passes her something. Harrington asleep in his childhood bed where Billy left him. Susan's laughter ringing out, audible even through the glass. Early Christmas morning--Susan likes to do a breakfast before presents, so they've all been awake for a while. Hawkins frozen solid and silent around him. There no sign of Billy in that house, of the blood he'd spat onto the floor the night before, no evidence except the little bit of bruising across his father's knuckles that he will explain away. Feeling stupid for going back there, for not being able to stay away, sliding down the wall of that house, breathing too hard. Knowing he could get caught and not caring, maybe hoping he does. Closing his eyes against tears. The thought loud and vicious and desperate and *certain* ripping apart his insides, that *he doesn't have a home*. Trudging back through the snow, dragging legs like lead to make it back to Harrington's once the family inside a house Billy used to live in starts to open presents. The

last thing he hears--Susan's delighted laughter. His father had gotten her a necklace. Her silence bought for another year.

Leaning against a bar in Chicago, Billy is a year older than that boy who had watched his father through a window, huddled against the cold. He doesn't feel older. He doesn't feel changed, either, not in the way he'd started to think he might be. Whatever magic Harrington's worked this year feels like it's dissolving around him, and that here, in this bar, Billy is the person he has always been. Disappointing. Disappointed. It claws at his stomach and he wants to drown it, wants to be who he was yesterday or last week, doesn't want this feeling inside him. Is afraid that he can't ever get rid of it. That'll be fucking perfect, Billy thinks, that his father can hold him back, still. That with hundreds of miles between them, Billy's still on his back on that hardwood floor, staring up and feeling alone. He feels like his insides are still being shredded by a million tiny teeth. He wants to drown this thing inside him. He slams his empty shot glass back onto the bar. Asks for another.

He hates Christmas. He wishes he weren't so fucking in love with Steve Harrington. Harrington fucking loves Christmas.

Billy sighs, tapping the newest empty glass on the bar. The whiskey sits warm in his chest and the bartender is making eyes at him, asking a question Billy understands, speaking Billy's language. He's a good looking guy, and Billy thinks of a time when his answer would have been yes, I'm fucking into that. Women have brushed up behind him, pressed their tits against his back and giggled, and he can remember a time when he would have turned to them and said "Nice to meet you," like he meant it, all bedroom eyes and low-voiced pleasure.

He doesn't say either of those things. He fiddles with the glass and wonders when he became someone who would do something that makes him feel so torn up just because he loves another person. Fucking Christmas. Fucking Harrington.

He knows it's been a long time since he even thought there was a chance he could be that kind of someone. Loving. Loved.

Here's a truth Billy doesn't share: his mom left.

Maybe a few once-friends in California know it, but aside from them there are exactly three people in the world who know. One is Billy, one is his dad. The last is his mom.

Leaning against a bar in Chicago, Billy can picture that day with the same clarity that's always haunted this particular memory. It was sunny and June, unbelievably hot. The California sunshine spilled through the window, lighting up the bathroom where Billy, fifteen and a foot taller than he'd been the year before, was trying to figure out if the thing on his chest was a hair or if it had to do with the nasty sunburn he'd gotten from walking the beach all morning. He'd been restless back then, but in a different way. Like he couldn't hold still, like he was pushing the edges of his map to see where they would let him break free.

Billy remembers it all: the spreading red on his chest, the slow ache from the burn, the sound of his father's car pulling up outside the house. Billy had counted the seconds--it usually took forty-five from slamming the car door for his dad to open the front door and slam it closed behind him. He'd slammed both extra hard that day, which is how Billy had known he'd had a tough day at work, which is why at first Billy hadn't bothered coming out of the bathroom.

Then, the sound of the bedroom door opening. Billy had been surprised, his mom had said she wanted a nap and usually that meant she would sleep until the next morning. Then, the foreign click, click, click of her heels on the tile floor of the hallway. The worst part of these memories, of their clarity, is the sound. He can hear every fucking sound from that day over the rushing in his ears. The slamming doors, click, click, click, the whine of the fans, a strange and heavy thump.

He'd walked out of the bathroom.

"What the fuck is that?" his dad had said, staring at her, slow disbelief in his voice. Billy, shirtless, skinny, sunburned, only fucking fifteen said, "Mom?"

"I can't do this anymore," she'd said, talking to Billy's dad and not looking at Billy. "I'm sorry. I just--I can't."

There had been no debate. No questions. Sometimes Billy wonders if he could go back--if there is anything he could have said to change her mind. Probably not, though. His dad's always been a mean son of a bitch and his mother had stood there in nice jeans and a pretty blouse wearing high heels. Billy had never seen her look so at peace or so beautiful. She'd stood there in the face of her husband's silence while Billy realized that the weird thump he'd heard had been the suitcase she'd brought out with her. Outside, a car honked, loud and long. Impatient. A cab or a friend, Billy hadn't looked out the window and will never know. That question: *who?* still bothers him sometimes. She'd picked her suitcase up at the honk, looked at Billy for the first time in that conversation and the last time in his fucking life. She'd walked out the door.

Billy wonders, years later, what it was that she couldn't do. Be a wife? Be a mom? Be a fucking decent human being? Take him with her?

For a week after, Billy hadn't said a single word, had run to the window every time he'd seen headlights turn onto their street. She didn't come back; a week became two, became a month, became a few months, became Christmas. Christmas morning, that first Christmas morning without her, wasn't the first time Billy's dad had hit him, but it was the first time he hadn't stopped. It was the first time Billy had stood in the bathroom, cleaning up his own blood, trembling. After that came Billy's own anger, hard and fast and real, came learning to drink, and smoke, and fight, and fuck. Came being the disappointment his dad saw him as.

After *that* came Susan and Max, came stitches at the hospital on a warm June day, *thanks, dad!*, Billy had shouted, wild and out of control and bleeding, laughing and laughing and laughing, blood on his teeth, Susan and Max behind a closed door with music playing. They moved to Hawkins--Billy's fault, he shouldn't have made his dad angry and should have kept his mouth shut when he did, Max's fault, she shouldn't have been crying when she peeked out the bedroom door at the knocking neighbor that night, neither of their faults, it doesn't matter.

Billy left California angry and got to Hawkins angrier. He'd almost killed Steve Harrington and a bunch of kids. It's wild to think about. Terrifying, how close to the edge he came. How close he'd gotten to *no return*.

Billy slams a third empty glass onto the bar and leans into the burn of the alcohol in his chest.

"You all right?" someone says--the bartender, he's looking at Billy through long eyelashes, "Next one's on me," and Billy thanks him, leans into the edges of chaos gnawing at his skin. It's the closest he's come to out of control in a long time, and under pinprick colors of Christmas lights, Billy can imagine exactly what it would feel like to give in to the anger in his chest, to split at the seams and let out all chaos shredding his lungs and making it hard to breathe, can picture gritty sex in a dirty bathroom with the bartender buying his shots--

The bar is hot, and loud, the steam on the windows glows from the decorations they've put up. There's wreaths and garland and colorful Christmas lights framing the ceiling, small dots of brightness reflecting off the top of the bar. They look like the Christmas lights that Harrington leaves up all year, oh god, what the fuck is he doing, *fuck*. He throws back the fourth shot, throws down enough cash to pay for all of them, feels sick and like there's no solid ground beneath him at all. He can feel something old and mean inside him, rattling his ribcage, wanting to be let out. That thing that used to goad him pick fights in bars and in classrooms and to spit blood on the floor of people's homes. It would be so easy to just--

He's outside before he really decides to leave and the cold air in Chicago is biting and bracing. It clears his head in a way that the sun never managed, back in California. Billy says he hates the cold, but he loves the way it gets him out of his head.

Billy slams himself back against the brick wall of the nearest building, gulping in deep breaths of frozen air and wondering at all the darkness that still curls up inside him. It's been so long since he's felt like this, it must be all the darkness, the pinprick Christmas lights, this fucking time of year. Fuck. He drags a hand down his face, realizes he's shaking, and tries to reel himself back in. It's been awhile since he felt his anger that close to the surface, since it's been

anything other than background noise, something to be ignored until it recedes.

He's drunk and it's a long, cold walk back to the apartment. Billy almost never drinks in their neighborhood when he slips out at night like this, doesn't want to see people he knows, likes to be anonymous, but tonight he wishes he'd stayed closer, wishes he'd stayed more grounded. Usually, there's a thrill in knowing he's far enough from home that no one knows him, that he could get *fucked up* and chooses not to. Billy feels on shaky ground as he stumbles along deserted sidewalks, because tonight--for longer than a few seconds--Billy had wanted to just give in, to get fucked up, to fuck up.

It's hard to breathe, still, even with the cold air in his lungs. Billy trips twice, hauls himself off pavement, looks down at his scratched up palms and up at the starless sky and says, "*Fuck.*" He's had too much to drink, but what the Hell, right? His brain is vicious, reminds him it's the fucking holidays now--all the billboards say it's ok to indulge.

Billy hauls himself home, step by stuttering, difficult step. He slows to a stop once he's finally outside their apartment, even though he's freezing his balls off out here. The long walk has done him good. After the falls, after grabbing buildings and street signs with frozen fingers and scratched palms for support, he feels like he's losing whatever it was tearing him apart in that bar. The sound of his mother's high heels, maybe. He's pushing it all back down where it belongs, tucking it away. Billy stands there, looking up at their apartment building for a while, staring at the light on in what he knows is their bedroom.

More startling, more grounding than any cold air or any long walk or any scraped palm is the sudden ache he feels knowing that Harrington woke up alone in bed, turned a light on to go back to sleep, to chase away the shadows because he's a grown ass man who's scared of the dark because--well, because Billy hadn't been there. He holds onto that ache for a second, looks up at that light, knows he needs to go back inside--to go home.

A car honks somewhere, and Billy nearly jumps out of his skin. His brain answers the honk with a click, click, click of high heels. Billy

rolls his shoulders, shakes out his arms, and walks up the steps and into the building. He's near silent as he creeps up each of the *five* flights of stairs--not ten million, Harrington's hyperbole is out of control even in this new building--and pulls off his shoes, shirt, and pants in the hallway once he's inside their apartment.

Billy opens the bedroom door quietly and shuts the light off as he slinks into the room. Harrington whines from the bed at the sudden darkness, shifts nervously. He's curled in on himself in the middle of their bed, Billy can make out his outline in the streetlight-softened darkness, the way he's kind of wriggling, all nervous energy in the darkness, even mostly asleep.

"Shh," Billy says, an echo of himself earlier that night. "M'right here, Harrington. Jesus, you're needy."

"Baby," Harrington breathes, which he almost never calls Billy except when he's like this. He uncurls enough to reach for Billy, and Billy catches his hand, kisses his palm. "You stink," Harrington murmurs, "Like whiskey."

Billy drops down under the blankets with him, tugs Harrington against his chest, and the weight of him settles Billy, locks him back into place. He feels drunk and out of control, tired, needy himself. Harrington whines, wriggles a little and protests Billy's cold skin, but doesn't really pull away. Billy is thankful and embarrassed about it, doesn't know what he would do if Harrington wriggled all the way back to his own side of the bed, to the warmth of covers untouched by Billy's still frozen skin.

He presses his face into Harrington's hair, breathes in the smell of his shampoo. Harrington's protests fade, he lifts himself up, dislodging Billy and looking down at him. "Hey," he says, a sleepy greeting, his brow wrinkled in a frown. "Baby," Harrington says again, for the second time in as many minutes. He presses slow kisses along Billy's jaw, and Billy goes still underneath him. "Hey," Harrington says again, "Where are you right now?"

He cards his fingers through Harrington's hair, tugs, pulls him back up and wraps his arms around him. He's tired, he wants to say, let's just go back to sleep. He doesn't say it, just holds on tight, and

Harrington curls up with him, close, tangles them together and doesn't push Billy for any more answers.

Billy knows the second Harrington falls asleep, it's like all the energy has been sucked out of him, his breathing evens out. There's darkness all around them, there's darkness somewhere inside Billy, where Harrington's head is pressed against his chest, but Harrington still sleeps soundly.

Eventually, after a long, long time, Billy sleeps too.

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Around the holidays, Harrington is constantly telling him, smelling of coffee and looking tired in the good way, the cafe is especially busy. Because of that, Billy isn't surprised when he wakes up alone that morning. Normally, Harrington has like--some sort of stealth mode, but he thinks he must have woken up this morning. He has a vague memory of that same frown that had wrinkled Harrington's brows when Billy'd gotten into bed looking down at him in the soft light of barely after dawn. He can still feel the kiss Harrington had pressed to his forehead, the whisper against his ear, "I got you." Harrington calling him *baby* again like he was reminding Billy of who he is. He remembers more clearly the door shutting behind Harrington, because Harrington had tripped, sworn, apologized, and Billy had woken up enough to laugh at him.

So Billy wakes up alone and wriggles over to Harrington's side of the bed, up against the wall, and lies there. He rolls over so he can watch the sun creep up and spill cold Chicago light into the bedroom. He tries to fall back asleep.

Around 8:30 he gives up. He's got a long time before he has to be at work, so he showers, takes a while getting his hair right, rubs on a little cologne and winks at himself in the mirror. Still too much time left, he shrugs at his reflection and grabs the giant winter coat he now has--it had been a present, a group effort when he'd been in Hawkins with Harrington for Thanksgiving. Billy will never, *ever* own up to the warmth he felt when Dustin handed it to him, a stupid red bow flopping on top, the rest of Harrington's termites and Max crowded around behind him with big eyes and sneaky smiles. He

fucking loves this coat. He zips it up--forgoes the hood so he doesn't mess up his hair--and locks the apartment door behind him.

He's going to take the long way to work, by way of the cafe. Billy doesn't fully realize it until the door chimes when he walks in, but he's already made the decision.

It's Sade behind the counter that morning, not Harrington, and Billy grins at her. She's his favorite of all the people Harrington works with. She has a good taste in music, warm dark eyes and a wide smile that shows all her teeth. There's an edge to her and Billy likes that. Also, she makes him the most *disgusting* sugary coffee things that he will never own up to loving, but which he craves. She's kept this secret for nearly nine months, and she's earned something like devotion from Billy because of it. Harrington likes her, but Billy's pretty sure Sade is *his* friend, and that's nice, too.

"Morning, Hargrove," she says, because there's no line when he comes in. Billy almost never sees anyone at this cafe. He's starting to wonder how they stay open. It might honestly be a front, which would be the exact kind of trouble Harrington would get himself into, honestly.

"Sade," Billy greets, taking the hand she extends and brushing a kiss across her knuckles. They have a thing. Billy is in love with Steve Harrington and he has a *bit* that he does with one of his co-workers. The Billy of years past cringes somewhere in the back of his mind, but this Billy just smiles, feels the thing in his chest and pushes it down deeper, willing it away.

"I have a treat for you," she says with a secretive smile. She steps away, makes the machines in front of her beep and hiss steam. He waits patiently for her to set a warm cup down in front of him. When she does, he curls his fingers around it, feels the heat from it creep up his arms.

"Thank you," he says, because he's learned manners, and also Sade is his favorite. "Is Harrington here?"

"He's in the back doing inventory, which he's been doing for the past two hours," she answers, wiping up a spill on the counter. Her nails

are bright yellow. Billy thinks it should look stupid, but it looks cool on her.

“Any chance he can take a break?” Billy asks, sipping at the coffee and--once he’s confirmed it’s still just the two of them, making an appreciate *mmm* sound at the taste.

“As long as he comes right back inside if it gets busy,” Sade says, but she’s smiling. “Let me get him.”

Billy listens to the way she sing-shouts Harrington’s name as she pushes through the back door, and a few seconds later the man himself appears, green-aproned and red-cheeked from the heat in the back or maybe something Sade said. “Hi!” Harrington greets him with a big, dopey grin. Harrington always looks so happy to see him, like every time it’s a pleasant surprise. Billy’s stomach twists.

“Can we go outside?”

“It’s fucking freezing. You’re a nightmare,” Harrington complains, but he’s grabbing his coat and throwing it on and following Billy out the door.

There’s an alley between the cafe and the next building. It’s dirty and mostly for trash, but if they stand a couple hundred feet back from the sidewalk, it’s not too bad. When Billy visits Harrington at work, this is almost always where they talk. Close enough that Harrington can run back inside if he needs to, far enough that there’s no prying eyes. Billy steps right into Harrington’s space, pressing him back against the wall and kissing him, one hand on his chest, the other still holding the coffee.

Harrington tips his head to the side, breaks the kiss, looks suspicious. “I thought you only drink black coffee?” he says, licking his lower lip. He looks so fucking good doing it that Billy can’t breathe for a second. “You taste like cinnamon,” Harrington adds, and Billy feels caught and amused all at once.

“That doesn’t sound like a complaint,” Billy murmurs into the air between them.

"It isn't," Harrington answers, tipping his head back down to bite at Billy's lip.

Harrington makes everything so goddamn hard, Billy thinks, because Billy loves him, because Billy wants to give him fucking everything, and now Billy needs something, and he's not used to needing, and maybe that's Billy making things hard, but it's hard all the same.

"Hey," Billy says, very softly, pulling back without pulling away. Their winter coats make strange, swishy sounds where they slide together. "I need something."

The sounds their coats make stop when Harrington, back against the bricks, eyes trying to catch Billy's, goes still. Billy doesn't ask for much and he's probably freaked Harrington out. They're opposites in a lot of ways, and in this especially. Harrington would balk now, say the wrong thing, avoid the conversation. Billy's never had time for that, says what he means and says it how he means it even when it's hard, even when he isn't really sure what he's asking for. "Listen," he says, "I need a few days."

He'd known the second he'd walked into the cafe that this was the right choice, that this was the conversation they were going to have, but it still makes him ache a little to watch the expressions Harrington is definitely trying to hide flit across his face. "I--" Harrington starts, "Why?"

"I need some time," Billy says. "I need to do something. I'm going to come back, don't look at me like that, Harrington, Jesus."

Harrington tips his head forward, presses their foreheads together, and Billy feels, more than hears, his shaky exhale. Harrington's shit--whatever it is, they've never discussed the details, a secret Harrington keeps like Billy keeps about his mom--has made him stubborn and a little impulsive. A year into this, Billy knows that it has also made Harrington feel like there's no solid ground beneath his feet, makes him trust permanence only cautiously. Billy gets that feeling, has had his world shift, and shift, and *shatter* more times than he cares to count. He kicks Harrington's foot. Waits.

"I trust you," Harrington says finally, and Billy smiles and kisses him

again, soft and slow until, breathing hard, Harrington breaks the kiss again. “How long is a few days?”

“Two,” Billy says, hoping he’s right. “Well, three, maybe. Two nights.”

“It’s almost Christmas,” Harrington says, which Billy knows. Harrington loves Christmas. Christmas threw up all over their apartment, will soon be throwing up all over the Harrington Family Home--Billy always capitalizes it in his brain, will probably also throw up all over the Byers’s house and probably Hopper’s office, too. Harrington loves Christmas. Billy loves Harrington. So he’s going to have Christmas, apparently. Because he loves Harrington. This is all kind of a lot for Billy, honestly.

“I know,” Billy says, “I’ll be there for Christmas, ok?” Christmas is a lot farther away than three days, which means Harrington’s thinking Billy might need longer, is trying to prepare for it. “Three days,” Billy says, a little like a promise.

“Ok,” Harrington says, very slowly. “Three days.”

“I know you weren’t college material,” Billy teases, soft and to the air between them, “But you *can* count to three, right?”

He can feel Harrington’s laugh against his lips, kisses him again, flavored with cinnamon and whatever else Sade put in his drink, stands there with Harrington until some of the tension has drained from his shoulders. Billy--needs this, he’d meant it, but it shouldn’t need to make Harrington feel like the ground is shifting underneath his feet.

They stay there for long enough that Billy’s coffee cools, long enough that the clouds overhead are starting to release little flurries of snow, long enough that the door to the cafe chimes and Sade’s yelling for Harrington to come back in. “Three days,” Billy promises, kissing Harrington one last time with cold lips. “Hey,” he says, when Harrington won’t meet his eyes, then, more insistent, “Babe.” Harrington shifts his weight from foot to foot, looks up. “I love you,” Billy says, serious.

"I love you too," Harrington answers over the sound of Sade shouting. Billy lets him leave the alley first, watches him walk away, takes the last few sips of his cold coffee, exhales, and then breathes in the icy Chicago air and snowflakes.

"All right," he says to himself, quiet, and walks to work.

The shop is loud and busy, even though it's barely opened. He hadn't been lying when he told Harrington how many people want their cars fixed or updated or cleaned or--honestly, a whole array of things Billy thinks are stupid. It's why he knows his boss is such a good person, because when Billy says he needs a few days off, there's no hesitation. Billy gets the feeling that his boss maybe used to be a little like Billy, that he understands something in the tension of Billy's shoulders, the white knuckled grip on the door handle. Billy takes his check, says thank you and means it, and then walks back to the apartment, quick, a little urgent. Harrington has hours left at work, but Billy knows he needs to be gone before he gets home or he might not be able to go through with it.

Billy packs quickly, throws important shit in a bag, makes sure he has his big winter coat. He turns the Christmas lights on for Harrington, then the hallway light, the light in the kitchen, the bedroom light. Billy doesn't like it when they waste electricity like this, but it'll be dark when Harrington gets home, and so Billy leaves the lights on.

The bus station is crowded when he gets there. Lots of people traveling somewhere, for work or for business or for--something else. Whatever reasons people have for travel. Billy looks around at everyone, the businessmen in their suits, the harried people tugging their children by the hand. One is crying--a little boy, not a businessman. Billy's shit at guessing ages, but he figures the kid is under ten. He's with his mom and dad, and mom pats his head, but she's looking at the schedule and squinting at the board, clearly stressed. It's dad who drops down to eye level, who speaks quietly until the kid stopped crying and hugs him.

Once, when Billy was eleven, he'd cried because he tripped and his dad had knelt down to his eye level and put a hand to the side of Billy's head. There had been a truly wild moment where Billy thought he was going to be comforted, but his dad had curled his fingers in

Billy's hair so hard that his eyes had just watered more. "Don't embarrass me by crying in public ever again," his dad had said, and his dad must have looked soft and comforting to the people walking by.

Billy shakes the memory off his shoulders and tightens his hold on the bag he'd packed. He shoulders his way through the busy terminal until he can get to the ticket counter. "Hi," he says, because he's learned manners and the man selling tickets looks nice, "I need one ticket to the closest station to Hawkins, Indiana."

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Billy had known, when he and Harrington had finally made things--official--that he wasn't just getting a boyfriend out of the deal. There's something kind of nice about the little family Harrington had come with, as unorthodox as they might be. Billy had known that they would welcome him, too, from the moment Harrington had been such an asshole about the brussels sprouts and Joyce had acted like it was no big deal. Billy's spent some time around Harrington's actual mom by now, and she's nice, but a lot. Very in Billy's face and space, all skittering hands, and soft eyes, a little pity in her gaze. He doesn't know what she knows about him, but he suspects that small towns carry gossip just as well now as they did years ago. By now, he thinks, most people must have an idea of the kind of man his dad is. Even if they don't believe it.

Billy thinks this trip might have been a mistake as he's standing on the bus station platform closest to Hawkins, staring at the rapidly setting sun, and feeling the kind of cold that makes his bones brittle. Indiana is--not Chicago, he thinks, staring out at the nothingness around him, thinking about Hawkins and the people there, noticing the way that the piles of snow turn from dirty grey to white a few feet out from the station, eyeing the road that will take him to Hawkins.

That's the biggest problem he has right now. The road. His lack of a car.

Families like the one Steve has come with a lot of phone numbers to be memorized or written down. Billy thinks about all the fucking

phone numbers he's had to call for Steve--to ask about Steve, to ask *for* Steve, to ask about some dish they're supposed to bring to some gathering, to arrange something with Nancy. Harrington keeps a little notepad next to the phone where he updates numbers. Old ones are crossed out as people move, sometimes new numbers get added. The list is in descending order of call frequency, which Billy thinks is kind of dumb, because there's no way Harrington actually needs to *look* at Nancy or Dustin's numbers, but there they are, right there at the top.

He's thinking about it because there are twelve thousand numbers on that sheet--Billy winces, Harrington and his hyperbole are rubbing off on him--and he can't remember more than one of them. He's feeling stupid, and angry, and restless, standing at the bus station and staring at the payphone like it's going to answer his questions. He could call the operator, but--he shakes his head.

For a minute, he entertains the idea of calling Max. But then his father might pick up. Billy thinks of the sound of his voice and lights a cigarette. Yeah, he can't call Max.

Billy hasn't been back to Hawkins without Harrington since that Christmas he wound up on his doorstep. It's usually Harrington who handles the travel arrangements. On big holidays, Nancy always picks them up, which Billy knows makes Harrington ache and bat his eyes and go all gooey. There's a part of Billy that's proud of himself, how comfortable he is with the relationship that still exists between Harrington and Nancy, because once he wouldn't have been ok with it at all. Once, it would have been a convenient way to indulge his anger, to hurt someone and lash out. Now, he thinks of Nancy's little car and wishes he'd thought to call her. Or to write her number down, because he likes Nancy and it would be ok, maybe, if she were the one here picking him up. She'd stayed with them in Chicago over the summer, just her, and it had given Billy time to get to know her. She's--fine. He likes her.

He doesn't know her number though, can think of only one. One number besides Max, anyway. Billy really doesn't want to have to fucking do this. Isn't sure if he can even ask. It's not like they're friends, just a relationship of convenience. They love the same person, he figures, so maybe it'll work out. Billy dawdles. He finishes his cigarette, then another one, feels the cold really settle over him

before he finally checks the time--late enough to call, now--picks up the phone, dials.

It's freezing cold when the car finally pulls up, and Billy is almost ready to admit that Harrington might have a point about the bus terminal being too far away. He's been standing here in the middle of fucking nowhere Indiana, waiting, for long enough that the tips of his fingers are numb. Billy can hear music from inside the car--tries to place it, he likes the song, but it's a few years old now--and jogs down the steps, clutching his duffle. He opens the door.

"Cool," says Dustin, slow and drawn out, looking a little wide eyed from the driver's side. Belatedly, Billy wonders if Dustin knows how to drive. He almost asks, but doesn't, and Dustin doesn't say anything after that one word. He also doesn't move any of the papers off the passenger seat. Billy counts to ten in his head, but nothing happens, so he shrugs and sits down on top of them, bag in his lap. "Hey!" Dustin says like he's waking up from a nap, slow and then urgent, "Wait! That's my lab report--son of a *bitch* it took me forever to--" and he shoves Billy's shoulder, so Billy lifts himself up and Dustin grabs the papers.. Billy snorts as Dustin places the crumpled report into the backseat tenderly. "What?" Dustin asks when he straightens back up.

"Nothing," Billy says, "I'm just wondering if the grumbling is an inherited trait from Harrington or a nurture thing from him."

"He's not my read dad...you know that--right?" Dustin says it very, very slowly, like he's talking to an idiot.

"Nurture, then," Billy decides. Dustin rolls his eyes. Billy presses his fingertips to the heater, and realizes that's something Harrington always does, wonders if he's been nurtured too, wants to punch himself in the face for the thought. "Thanks for picking me up," Billy adds, grudgingly, "I know it's a long drive."

"Yeah not a problem," Dustin says. "I called Max first, by the way. She couldn't come. She wasn't expecting you and she has newspaper today. It's fine, though. I'm a pretty good driver." Dustin turns out of the parking lot, tapping his finger on the steering wheel to the beat of the song. Billy spends a silent moment staring out the window and

hoping Dustin is a better driver than Mike.

“No offense,” Dustin says, breaking the silence, “But what the fuck are you doing here?”

Billy wishes he knew. At first, on the bus, he’d thought he might be looking for something. He’d stared out the window, walkman headphones shoved in his ears, listening to one of Harrington’s stupid CDs and wondering what it could be he wanted to find in Hawkins, Indiana that he’d need to be alone for. This is really the only thing he’s sure about--he can’t do this with Harrington when they’re home for Christmas, it has to be alone.

“I don’t really know, kid,” Billy says after a beat, which is more honest than he’d wanted to be. He can feel Dustin’s eyes on him, and wishes he would look at the road instead.

“Ok,” Dustin says. “Is Steve ok?”

“Yeah,” Billy says.

“Cool,” Dustin says, nods his head. He looks a little suspicious then, turning his head to look at Billy, and Billy swears when the car swerves. “Sorry!” Dustin chirps, “Has Steve said anything to you about Christmas?”

Fucking Christmas. “No. We’ll be here though, don’t worry.”

Dustin grins then, full and bright. He’s such a weird kid. Christmas makes Billy feel jittery just thinking about it, and he doesn’t really know what to say next.

The thing is, for all the time Billy has now spent with the assorted teenagers Harrington once adopted, he’s never spent time *alone* with any of them, with the obvious exception of Max. It’s weird to be alone in this car with Dustin, even though Billy knows they’re--friends? Is he friends with a teenager? He’s not actually sure.

“So,” Billy says, when the silence becomes the kind of thick that makes him think too much--he’s really trying to think less, right now, doesn’t know what to do with his jitters or with the anger he knows is waiting beneath his skin--“What’s your lab report about?”

Billy hasn't been to a science class since he was dragged out of the building by the police for throwing a microscope through the window, so when he understands about thirty-five percent of what Dustin says, he's going to call it a win. They maintain this cordial level of conversation for a while, right up until they cross the line into Hawkins. Billy can feel the town pressing down around him like an actual, physical weight.

For all the times he's now been back here with Harrington, it's never gotten easier. Billy fiddles with the packet of cigarettes in his pocket and stares out the window. He can't smoke in the car with a teenager, can he? Harrington would kill him. He really needs a cigarette. Dustin keeps saying things and Billy keeps grunting in response, his eyes glued to the window. He can taste something like copper in the back of his mouth, his hackles are up. Billy looks down and sees he has a white knuckled grip on the door, tries to relax, can't stop looking at Hawkins and feeling the absence of Harrington here with him so viscerally that it actually hurts.

Eventually, Dustin stops trying to talk to him. Being back here is like being plunged into a pool of icy water, Billy thinks, only the water is boiling, and it's not water it's rage, and he's drowning in it, angry like he hasn't been in a while. It's a relief to sink into that feeling, because it's better than fear. He thinks that's what he would be if he didn't let the angry thing inside of him uncurl a little bit, stretch itself out. He would be afraid. It's better to be angry, so he lets himself feel angry.

"Do, uh, do you uh--want to come to my--house?" Dustin asks, in slow bursts once they're crossing through the center of town.

Billy realizes then that he doesn't have anywhere to stay. That one of Harrington's termites is offering him a *place to stay*. This was a fucking mistake.

"No," he says, because he doesn't want to spend any more time with Dustin, can feel that thing that's old and mean coiled deep in his bones, ready to break things, ready to hurt. He's got his shit together enough to know he can't be around Dustin with that inside him. He's done a lot of terrible things, could still do them, maybe, is starting to think he might try.

It can't be Dustin he does any of that shit to. Harrington would never forgive him. Billy thinks that he might never forgive himself.

He says, "the Diner," and it's not polite, and he doesn't say thank you, but Billy feels weirdly like he's floating, like he's outside his body, watching this building anger and hurt happen to someone else.

When he gets out of the car Billy still doesn't say thank you--he said it at the station, didn't he? He slams the door, pretends he doesn't see Dustin jump when he does it. Billy doesn't need to *grovel* for fuck's sake. Dustin did him a favor, that's all.

He doesn't wave at Dustin before going inside. He just walks in, listens to the chime from the door, and stares at the unchanged, fluorescent diner all around him. It's quiet inside, late for a Hawkins dinner. There's a table of high school kids in the corner, drawing shapes in salt on the table, a few families. Billy slides into a booth and orders a black coffee from the same waitress he's always had. He feels like he's being pranked. He feels like he wants to fucking hit someone. He feels, a little bit, like he wants to get hit.

There's a payphone outside. Billy can see it as he sips his coffee--too watery, fuck this is awful--and he thinks about whether or not he should call Harrington. He doesn't think he can stomach it. He's not sure if calling Harrington would lead to a fight or would make Billy give up and come back home. But--it's just--there's still that something mean vibrating under his skin, and Billy's worked so hard to keep that old and angry side of him separate from Harrington this last year. He's been keeping it at bay, tucked away deep down inside of him, and he can avoid it because Harrington's hands are soft when they touch him, and Harrington's smile is bright when he sees him, and so Billy doesn't need to feel any of it, or deal with any of it. Harrington makes him feel better when he's around, and so Billy gets to ignore that thing inside of him that sometimes shreds him apart. He keeps it away from Harrington.

He's not going to blow it all up now just because he's--what, a fucking pussy, having a meltdown in a diner in a shithole of a town that no one cares about anyway. Billy is in Hawkins to figure this shit out, and he's going to do it. Probably. Or, because Harrington's not here to help him keep whatever this is locked away, he's going to

implode, but either way, he'll have done something.

Billy isn't sure why he's come back to Hawkins, but underneath all the anger deep in his belly, he thinks that it's important. It's been a year, he thinks. He needs something, that's what he'd told Harrington. He's back in Hawkins because he needs something, and he's going to fucking figure out what it is. Probably.

He orders a second coffee, a third, a fourth. The caffeine gives him the jitters, but it's not like he has anywhere else to go. He orders a fifth.

Footsteps, a hand heavy on his shoulder. Billy jumps.

"We have to stop meeting like this," an exhausted sounding Hopper intones right before he slides into the booth across from Billy.

"What do you want," Billy says, not a question.

"The waitress called. You're loitering--thanks Denise," Hopper flashes a tired at the edges grin, accepts the mug of coffee placed in front of him. The waitress--Denise--does not offer Billy a refill.

"I'm paying for my fucking coffee," Billy snaps.

"Yeah, well, you also look like you're about to commit a murder, so she called me."

Billy stares down into his coffee, sullen. "What do you want," he repeats.

"Billy," Hopper says, and Billy can feel his eyes on him, feel the pause, so he looks up. Hopper's staring at him, scratching his beard. "I don't know where you are in your head right now, kid," Hopper says, "But it doesn't look good to me." Billy doesn't say anything. Hopper sighs. "Wherever you are, you need to get yourself back to the present. Whatever you're doing right now--"

"I hate this time of year," Billy says, sharp and sudden. Hopper doesn't flinch at the sneer Billy plasters on his face. "I hate Christmas," Billy says, and means it. "Has to do with my mom," he adds. She didn't leave at Christmas, but that doesn't seem to matter

to the edges of him that are sharpening, ready for a fight.

Hopper runs a hand through his hair. "That's a shitty hand you were dealt," he says. "But it doesn't help me understand why you're here, now, while Steve is back in Chicago. Why Dustin had to pick you up?"

So Dustin had called Hopper, too. These fucking kids can't keep their mouths shut.

"I don't know why I'm here," Billy says.

"Ok. Do you have somewhere to stay?"

Probably he can find one. "Yes."

Hopper looks at him for another long moment and throws cash on the table to pay for their coffees. "Right," he says. "You can sleep on my couch."

"I don't need your--"

"Billy," Hopper says. "Shut up and get in my truck or I'm going to arrest you and you're going to get in my truck anyway. I don't have time for this. It's been a long day and El is waiting at home. It's a school night so she can't stay up late and watch tv, but she will if I'm not there. Understand?"

For the second time in his life, Billy looks Jim Hopper in the face as Hopper offers him a lifeline. He almost tells him no.

It's that, more than anything, that makes him say yes.

Billy turns his head away, juts his chin out, feels stubborn and stupid and a little off kilter. "I understand," he grinds out, not looking at Hopper. He's saying something out loud that the Billy who lives with Steve Harrington wants him to mean. Billy feels like he's floating, feels like he doesn't know who he is anymore. Once, late at night and under the covers, Harrington said that he didn't think he could have done what Billy did, on his own without all those people in his corner. Billy licks his lips and turns back to Hopper, half a challenge in his eyes, wonders if Harrington was this much of a little shit about

asking for help.

Billy believes Hopper--if he doesn't come willingly, he's pretty sure he's getting arrested. If he gets arrested, someone is definitely going to call Harrington. Probably four different people will, plus Flo at the station.

Billy stands up. He follows Hopper into his truck.

Harrington has been talking a lot lately about how a year is a long time. Billy knows it's because he's sentimental. Harrington is soppy sometimes in a way that makes Billy feel soft and in love, and he thinks about that, tries to draw himself back to the present like Hopper said, pictures Harrington framed in their kitchen window, in the basement of some dingy apartment building, dancing to music he says he doesn't like with eyeliner smudged under his eyes. Billy can picture Harrington, and he tries to hold on to that, to ground himself. It's harder than it should be, he thinks, as they wind through Hawkins. A year is a long time, a hundred thousand perfect moments. He pictures Harrington, sees Hawkins, and knows as he curls his fingers around his necklace that a year is long enough for some things, but not long enough for others.

They drive past the turn to his father's house. Well, one of the turns Billy would need to make to get there. Billy feels like all the air has been sucked out of him, feels the thing under his skin come roaring to life, hot like a fire, like boiling water, like rage. He wants to be better than that thing that shreds him apart. He grinds his teeth. "Sorry," he grits out.

"What?" Hopper asks, glancing at him before looking back at the road.

"I'm sorry," Billy repeats, because he is a better person than he used to be, even if he doesn't feel like it right now. "For earlier."

"Welcome back," Hopper says. Billy counts his breaths--it's something Harrington had taught him to do, something that helps Harrington when he starts to turn the heat up and rearrange the furniture and play the tv too loud. Billy counts his breaths and flattens his palm on his thigh, lifts each finger slowly, like he's fighting to get just that

one in the air and keep the rest down. He focuses on that, on the movement of his hand, on the inhalation and exhalation of his chest, on the pendant curled still in his other fist. Tangible things.

“Can I open the window?” Billy asks, and Hopper doesn’t ask why, just nods, and Billy lets the cold air hit him in the face and sucks it down like he’s drowning. When Harrington gets worked up about the things in the shadows, he likes to keep it warm. Billy always craves the cold, feels like he can breathe again, like the air is cooling down whatever hot thing lives in his chest.

When they pull up outside of Hopper’s cabin, down the long, long driveway to the house still hidden by trees, Billy doesn’t feel better, exactly. He’s more aware of himself, though. He’s trying harder to reel himself back, to stuff whatever it is down where he keeps it.

The door swings open before they get to it, which surprises Billy because Eleven is sitting on the couch when he steps inside, chewing on a waffle. Even as a teenager, nearly ready to graduate high school, she’s never lost that wafish look about her, but she looks healthier, happier. Once, Harrington had quoted *To Kill a Mockingbird* at him, something about how kids that age bounce. Billy knows that he and Eleven share some shit between them, even if they’ve never talked about it. He’s happy she had people earlier than he did. He’s happy that she gets to bounce.

“El,” Hopper says, stomping snow off his boots, and there’s something like a warning in his tone. He looks pointedly back at the door as he closes it. “We have a guest.”

“I know,” she says, “I made extra.” She holds up the plate of waffles on the table, waving it at Billy and Hopper.

“That isn’t really what I meant, kid,” Hopper sighs, gruff, but he ruffles her curly hair like she’s still a child and she beams.

Her eyes land on Billy then, laser focused, Billy feels like she can see right through him. There’s a long moment of silence before her face goes a little sad. “Oh no,” she says, softly, frowning at him. She walks over, pushes the plate of waffles into his chest. “Not enough,” she says. “This will take more.”

Billy feels restless and scrutinized. He looks around the cabin to hide the energy he can't quite shake, turning slowly to take the room in. He's been here before, in the last year, so it looks to him like it's always looked. It's grown over the years, though, he knows. Whenever they're here, Harrington always talks about how much bigger it is--and brighter. All of them had spent a summer, Harrington told him once, helping Hopper build it up, adding another bedroom, a little more space in the kitchen. Harrington had described it as an absolute disaster, which Billy believes, because he can't picture Harrington or his termites being particularly good at building things, but the end result is nice. It feels homey in here. Billy looks at the details that make it a home, the crumpled blanket tossed over a chair, the magazines in precarious stacks all over the place. He looks at it, and then he takes a bite out of the waffle, then another, practically inhales the two left on the plate. He's *starving*, hadn't realized it until he'd tasted food.

"I know," El says, and Billy glances in surprise at the kitchen, where she's standing at the toaster looking smug. He must have said it out loud. She comes back over to him a few minutes later with a stack of waffles. She drops them happily onto his plate. "Christmas," she says, half a question, kind of knowing.

"El," Hopper says again, a warning in his tone. She waves her hand at him, dismissive.

"Jim," she says. She sounds a little exasperated. "He is *Steve's*," there's a lot of weight in the way she says it, a heavy pause where Billy feels like he's being looked at, even though her eyes are locked on Hopper. "He is fine." A pause, her head tipped to the side, her eyes boring holes in Billy as she looks at him. "He is not fine," she amends. "I trust him."

Hopper is grumbling something about secrets, and contracts, and *teenage girls*, but he walks into his bedroom. "You can get him set up on the couch, then," Hopper says through a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. It's a normal sentence, but to Billy it sounds like he's giving her permission for something. Hopper shuts the door and leaves Billy alone with Eleven.

"Christmas," she repeats, pointing at him. She settles herself back

down on the couch and looks at him intently, that same half questioning, half knowing look on her face. Very slowly she lifts her hand to her chest, curls it into a fist where her heart is, her knuckles white. She twists her face into something angry and mean.

All at once, then, Billy understands why she's asking about Christmas. He realizes what she must know about what's going on with him. The anger comes tumbling through him, a mudslide of bitter thoughts: Harrington had called her, what she meant when she told Hopper he's *not fine*, maybe Dustin had filled her in. Billy understands, then, what she's saying, what she knows about how he's feeling right now. He is defensive instantly, his hackles up, vulnerable and *angry* about it. *Don't you ever embarrass me by crying in public again* his brain whispers. "Harrington called you," he says, less an accusation than a statement, his tone blank.

He feels empty, so he makes himself feel angry. He doesn't need a fucking babysitter. Who told Harrington where he was? Probably Dustin. These fucking kids.

"No," Eleven says. "I had a--" she pauses, "A feeling," she points at her temple.

Staring at her on the couch, Billy can remember a night in the old apartment. Harrington had a terrible nightmare and Billy had trailed him into the kitchen. He'd been making coffee when the phone rang, Dustin on the other end. He remembers saying *what the fuck?* as he listened to Harrington's conversation. He remembers Harrington hanging up and saying that he couldn't really explain, but that Dustin called because a girl they both knew had a *feeling* that something was wrong. Eleven. Eleven had that feeling. "No fucking way," he says.

"Yes fucking way," El answers, and for some reason it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. Startled into laughter, he drops the waffles. He drops the waffles and the plate and waits for the crash--

Only it doesn't come. Because the waffles. The plate. They're hovering somewhere around his knees and Eleven's looking right at them.

"No *fucking* way," Billy says again.

“Yes fucking way,” Eleven echoes, grinning.

It’s the shock of it, maybe, of watching Eleven--holy shit--move the plate and the waffles back into his hands that helps Billy tuck the thing inside of him away for a second. He feels lighter and a little more himself. He wonders, “Are you making me feel bet--”

“No,” Eleven says, patting the couch next to her. Billy walks over to sit. “Not without asking,” she adds, rolls her eyes and points at Hopper’s door, “Rules.”

Billy wonders how you go about setting rules for a teenager with superpowers. He’s always--ok, not always, but in the last year--in the always that matters--had a lot of respect for Hopper, but that’s fucking impressive.

“Christmas,” Eleven prompts, once he’s settled and has eaten another waffle. She snatches one off his plate, smiles at him with big eyes and takes a crunchy bite. She makes the motion with a fist at her heart again, the angry face.

“My dad was--” he stops, “Is--” he stops again, “Not nice.”

“Like papa,” she says, very softly. Billy swallows hard.

“Yeah,” he says. “My mom couldn’t do it.” Eleven looks at him, head tipped to the side. “She left,” Billy talks about his mother out loud for the second time in less than an hour, hears his voice crack under the weight of this truth, has to look away and blink a few times because he can’t just cry in front of a teenage girl. “She left and she left me and my dad got--even less nice.” He hasn’t talked about this with anyone, not ever, he feels raw as soon as he says it, scraped out and shredded inside, sick to his stomach. He’s never *felt this*, not this much, never lets himself feel it. He always tucks it away for later.

He jumps when she reaches out and touches him, pokes his t-shirt where his necklace lies hidden. She looks at him, pokes again, a little harder. He takes it out, takes it off, drops it into her waiting hand. “Hers?” she asks, looking closely at it.

“Yeah,” Billy says, scrubbing at his face.

"Angry," Eleven says, still looking at the necklace, but pointing at him. "I was too," she looks up then, "Very angry." Billy almost says, *yeah* again, but doesn't because he feels like she isn't done talking yet. "Hurt," she says, "Me. And other people."

Billy thinks about the kind of damage an abused kid with superpowers could do. He remembers being fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, being in Hawkins, wishing he could bring the house down around his ears, crush his dad under the weight of it like Billy had felt he was being crushed. Eleven could have done that for real. Billy wonders, absently, if she did. She sits up then, puts the necklace back around his neck, leaves it tucked out of his t-shirt. She settles back against the couch.

She was angry and she hurt other people, but now she's this girl who goes to school and hangs out with Max, the best friend Max has probably ever had. She has a family in Hopper and Joyce, in Will and she's--not normal, exactly, but she's ok. She has friends and a life. Billy doesn't imagine she's going to go out and get so drunk at a bar that she almost fucks everything up. Billy doesn't imagine she's ever almost run over a bunch of kids. Billy doesn't imagine it's still so close to the edges of her, still twisted and rotting in her belly. Billy doesn't imagine she's still violent and angry like he is, she doesn't look like she's still broken like he is.

"You're wrong," she says. "I am. Still--" she makes the motion at her heart, the angry face. She points at Hopper's door again, "Helps," she says, "Mike too. Max too. Will too. Friends help--family helps."

"I felt like I was getting better," Billy says quietly, "But I'm not. Y'know? Jesus. Maybe I'm never going to get better."

Eleven shakes her head, "A year is long," she says, "Not long enough, yet." Billy wonders if she knows she's echoing his thoughts, if she's doing it on purpose. He watches, riveted, can't help it as she slowly unfurls her fingers, lifts them and gives him a thumbs up, "Someday," she says, pointing at her thumbs up sign and smiling. It sounds like a promise. "With Steve," she adds, "And Max. Me too. Your family."

"I don't know why I came here," Billy whispers, and he's so fucking tired all of the sudden. He misses Harrington and their apartment in

Chicago. He thinks he will never be strong enough to get off this couch.

Eleven looks at him, "It is," she says, sounding like she's quoting someone, "A process." She rolls her eyes at him with the phrase, a little conspiratorially. She looks out the window, at the frigid Hawkins night outside. "Here is--part of your process," she says finally. "Hiding feels good," she adds, holding her closed fist back to her chest then shoving it down under the couch cushion. "Easy," she says, "but bad. It stays here, like this." Her fist flies back to her chest. "Part of your process," she repeats, unfurling her fingers again, making another thumbs up.

Billy feels exhausted and angry and wrung out and scared. He feels all of it, right there in his chest, in a tight little ball, rotting in his belly. He pushes his face into his hands and breathes. There's a hand on his shoulder. "Blankets help," Eleven announces. She leaves the room for a moment, gives Billy a second to tremble and choke back the sob in his throat, angry, embarrassed, a little relieved that someone somewhere thinks he's going to figure his shit out. Even if she is a teenager girl. Especially if she has superpowers.

Eleven comes back a few minutes later with pillows and blankets, refuses Billy's offer to help her and makes the couch without touching anything. Billy watches, fascinated, as pillows and blankets float, as she builds him a bed. Billy's pretty sure she's showing off and he's impressed all the same. She fluffs the pillow with her hands, though, then sends the empty plate flying into the kitchen to land gently in the sink.

"I understand," she says, her voice very serious. "Steve too. Goodnight."

She shuts the door to her room behind her and Billy flops down, pulls the blanket over his body and curls up in a tight ball on the couch. She was right, he thinks, blankets do help. "Goodnight," he whispers to the now empty living room of the cabin. The lights, which had been left on, all go out at once. Billy laughs into his pillow. Falls asleep. There's tomorrow ahead, and he's not sure what it holds for him.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter got long, so I'm splitting Hawkins into two parts. The next will be up by the end of the weekend!

3. Hawkins: Part II

There's a moment when Billy wakes up where his body seems to split between two versions of himself. There's the one that reaches out for Harrington, automatically, startled when his arm slips down and his fingers brush a hardwood floor. That's the part that struggles for orientation, that sorts through the memories of the day before, the emotional roller coaster of rolling back into Hawkins, of teetering on the edge of something, of a conversation with a teenage girl who knew what it meant to be angry pulling him back from the precipice. That's the first version.

There's the second version, too, that barrels past the low thrum of anxiety when his fingers hit the floor instead of Harrington's shoulder, that knows this town for what it is. It's the part of him that's always there, coiled at his spine, that Hawkins brings out. That parts all jagged edges, gnawing anger, the defensive curl to his spine.

He hears the sound of footsteps and his eyes shoot open before he's ready. There's no time to adjust, there's just the adrenaline, the knowledge that he's in Hawkins, that here he isn't safe.

Billy, in the heartbeat it takes for him to pull himself to his feet, to cast the blankets to the floor and stand on shaky legs, teeters between those two versions of himself.

Usually, in Hawkins, Harrington is his anchor, the thing that keeps him changed.

This time it is a small rock. It pings off his forehead, sharp, and he whips around to find its source, half expecting El, half expecting something much worse and--

It's Max. She has a handful of rocks clutched in one fist. She throws another at him, her face twisted into something a little like anger.

"Ow," Billy says, more out of automaticity than actual surprise. Max makes a sound like a growl, throws another small rock, a little harder. "Ow," Billy says again with a little more feeling. "Why are you throwing rocks at me, Maxine?"

“Shut the fuck up!” she snaps, “They’re just pebbles.” Her blue eyes are wide and angry. Billy spent a lot of time reminding people, once, that she isn’t his sister. They aren’t related, but he looks at the angry tension on her face, the way her eyes are wide and narrowed all at once, and thinks they might as well be. “You’re such an asshole, Billy.”

She’s--not wrong, actually, but Billy’s had a long twenty four hours, and isn’t sure what he’s done recently to rile her up. She gets him good, right on the bridge of his nose, and he really isn’t convinced these qualify as pebbles. His eyes water without his permission, and Billy feels strung out and tired from the day before, feels embarrassed for the tears that are just a knee-jerk reaction to the sharp pain at his nose, and he reaches out a hand, “*Stop*,” he snarls at her, snatches at her wrist.

Her palm flies open, the pebbles scatter over the floor. They sound like boulders in the sudden silence as Max stares him down, her teeth half bared, breathing hard. Billy’s hand is tight around her wrist and she looks at it, then drags her eyes back to his face. There’s something like a challenge there, like every inch of Max is screaming *do it*. Billy remembers a time when he would have squeezed tighter just to watch her shrink away.

He lets her go like he’s been burned, both hands up in front of himself, knows his own eyes must be wide as saucers now. They’re both breathing hard. It feels a little like a staring contest. Billy thinks this Max in front of him has never shrunk away from anything. Feels proud of her. Feels small himself.

“I’m sorry,” he says, voice a little hoarse. He drops back down onto the couch. “For grabbing you like that--shit,” he exhales loudly. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re an asshole,” Max says again, but when he looks up she’s lowered herself down to sit on the coffee table across from him, and the tone of her voice is just this side of forgiving.

“Yeah,” Billy agrees.

For a moment, there’s silence between them. Max pushes her hair

behind her ears. "What are you doing here?" Max says, finally, looking at him. He feels pinned beneath her gaze, thinks about the way she knows him that almost no one else ever will, thinks that she's heard him cry, probably with her stupid ear pressed against his bedroom door, thinks that once, a few thousand miles from the town they stand in now, she cracked open a bedroom door and cried because she heard him howl in pain. "You can't just run off on your own," she says when he doesn't answer her. "You're not a psycho," the *anymore* hangs unsaid between them, but he hears it all the same.

Billy has spent the last twenty four hours feeling like he's crumbling, like he's collapsing in on himself, shedding the skin of the person he became in the last year and turning back into--whatever it was he used to be. He's felt like he's falling, but Max looks at him and says he's not that person anymore, sees the person he is now and he--he wants to fucking believe her.

Another rock hits his cheek, and Billy's shocked for a second that Max would do it, but when he turns his head it's El. For someone who just threw a rock at him with her *superpowers* she looks awfully serious, but he gets it when she points at Max and said, "Scared. For you."

They've never talked about it, but once Billy stumbled bleeding from the house into his car, drove through pain he couldn't bare, made it to the center of town, bleeding and shaking. They weren't friends, then, were barely cordial, but Max had come out of a store with her friends and ditched them, and he'd climbed into the passenger's side and he'd told her how to drive and she had driven him home.

She'd cried. He isn't even sure she remembers.

He always thinks of Harrington as his anchor in Hawkins, but he's starting to wonder if maybe--through no intention on either of their parts--maybe Max was there first.

"El," Max says, more a sigh than a snap, "I don't like it when you do that."

Eleven doesn't look sorry at all, but she does pout a little, "You *told* me," she says, sounding exasperated. "Friends don't lie. He should

know.”

Billy is a little fascinated by their easy friendship. He’s never had anything come that easy to him, except maybe Harrington, but that’s something special. El is looking at him again, kind of thoughtful, but then she turns to Max. “Breakfast,” she says, like a royal decree.

Max rolls her eyes. Billy is expecting waffles, but then Max digs a set of keys out of the pocket of her jeans and tosses them to him. He catches them, a little confused, and she says, “I thought you might prefer to drive,” before spinning on her heel and marching out the door. They’re probably going to have to talk about the fact that she was scared for him, but she’s doing a good job of avoiding the conversation. He cleans up the pebbles before he trails her outside, Eleven shutting the door behind them. Behind the wood, Billy hears the sound of locks sliding into place. Creepy.

“It’s Mike’s,” Max says once he’s settled behind the steering wheel. “Don’t break it.”

On a sunny December day under a bright blue Indiana sky, Billy finds himself driving through Hawkins with his little sister and her best friend, who has super powers. The town around them looks frozen in the early morning light, and Billy’s got the windows down. Max shivers, wraps her arms around herself even as her hair blows bright red around her face. Billy grins at her, can’t help it, steps on the gas and leans into the cold, takes a curve too sharp. It’s almost *deja vu*, the way Max sucks in a sharp breath, but it’s different too, because she cracks a nervous smile. In the back of the car, Eleven grins wickedly, claps her hands together.

“I only have like two hours,” Max says, trying to push her hair out of her face. “Newspaper thing. I didn’t expect you’d be in town.”

“Yeah,” Billy says. “I can take you wherever after we eat. Get Mike his car back.”

“I would like to see Mike,” Eleven says, perking up in the backseat. Then, “Turn fast again,” she adds, leaning forward to poke her head between them.

Billy pauses. "Wait a second," he says, "Are you both skipping school?"

Neither girl says anything, which is answer enough. Billy sighs loudly. Out of the corner of his eye he can see Eleven start to pout, so he steps on the gas again, speeding up, takes the next turn too sharp and tries to anchor himself with Max's quiet cursing and Eleven's delighted laughter.

~

At the diner, Denise who hates him is nowhere to be found. There must not be any real concern about the two teenagers skipping school, though, because they get a booth right away. Max and Eleven slide into one side, pressed shoulder to shoulder, and Billy sits across from them, asks the waitress for a coffee when she asks--says please.

"Waffles," Eleven says before the waitress asks her. Max shoves at her shoulder, hisses that she's being rude, and then orders the same. He can't help the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he watches the two of them bicker. He thinks about Max at Easter, covering for him when Eleven asked him to wash a dish. She's something else, he's known that for a little while now. He wishes that he'd realized it sooner.

He thinks about this girl, his little sister who wasn't, once. He says an absent thank you when the waitress puts his coffee down in front of him, tries not to be offended when Max's eyes widen in feigned shock.

"Have you called Steve?" Max demands after Billy's taken a sip of coffee. His generous thoughts about her fade all at once.

"No," he says. "He knows where I am."

"He does *not*," Max hisses, "Dustin is all worked up about keeping a secret from him. Why are you lying?"

Billy opens his mouth to answer, something sharp and angry about minding her own business, but Eleven cuts him off. "Part of his process," she says before he can speak. She's shaking a sugar packet

between her two fingers. Billy wonders if she's going to eat the sugar right here at the table.

"Lying shouldn't be *part of his anything*," Max says, glaring at Eleven and then glaring at Billy when Eleven looks unperturbed. "People are worried. He can't just disappear like--"

Like he did before, she doesn't say, but he still hears it.

Billy bristles, "I didn't disappear. I told Harrington I needed a few days."

"Something is wrong," Max says, "And you won't tell Steve, and you're not telling me, and so I don't know who the fuck you are telling, Billy, but this isn't--"

"How's dad?" Billy asks.

Max's mouth snaps shut so fast it's almost comical. Her cheeks flush red and her eyes go even wider. "Uh," she says.

Billy waits.

Max looks at Eleven, who looks back at her. Billy looks at Max. He wonders what the three of them look like to people who don't know them, wonders if there's anyone in this town who doesn't know Hopper's daughter, who couldn't recognize the bright red hair of Neil Hargrove's daughter. He assumes people probably recognize him, too. He wonders if they'd call him Neil Hargrove's son, still, or if people won't remember that Neil Hargrove has a son. If people even care. If people ever did.

"He's fine," Max says after a few more moments of complete silence, where Eleven does break it with any comments, and Billy focuses on breathing. "He got a promotion last month so he's been happy."

Billy has a question on the tip of his tongue, really isn't going to ask it, isn't even sure he wants to know, but he feels Eleven's eyes on him and looks resolutely into his mug of coffee. "Does he ever ask about me," he says, half a whisper, barely a question. He *wants his dad to ask about him*. He's horrified to realize it, hates his dad and still wants--still wants to be asked after, even if it's once, even if it's angry

when he says it.

He can hear Max swallow hard from across the table and he doesn't look up. "No," Max says, very quietly.

Billy feels anger clawing up his throat and he takes another sip of coffee, clenches his jaw and looks out the window. "Good," he spits, lying. "I don't want my name in his mouth."

But really, he's wondering how you have a kid for seventeen years and never ask about him after he's gone. He's wondering how you just leave your child. He's wondering why it keeps happening to him. He thinks he might cry, here in this diner, if he wonders these things for any longer, but he swallows it down, all of it, and he smiles at his little sister when the waitress puts the food down. "Tell me about school," he says, stealing a strawberry off her plate as she talks.

"Can you drop us at school, actually?" Max asks after Billy's paid the bill and they're walking back out to the car. "We'll be late, but I want to go to my newspaper thing and Eleven wants to see Mike, and he's at school, so..." Max shrugs, smiles.

"Do you want me to pick you up at the end of the day?" Billy asks. He's not technically allowed on school grounds post-microscope, but he doesn't think anyone is going to enforce it. Besides, who are they going to call about it, Hopper? The thought almost makes him laugh. "I've got a few more stops to make in town and it'd be easier if I had Mike's car."

"We'll get another ride home," Max says, "Take as long as you need." Eleven climbs into the backseat, but Max stops Billy with a hand on his arm. "I don't know what you're looking for, here, Billy," she says, quietly, "But I don't think you're going to find it in that house." She hugs him then, tight and sudden, and they're not really huggers, but it's kind of nice to hug her back, his stupid little sister, because he loves her.

"Thanks," Billy says when she lets go and he means it, even if she didn't really say anything you're supposed to thank someone for.

"That is the second time I've heard you say 'thanks' today. I'm

impressed. Steve does good work.”

Billy rolls his eyes and takes them both to school. He’s not really sure what he’s looking for either, but he knows where he can go to find it.

~

“Hey,” Billy says, leaning against the payphone and closing his eyes. There’s a woman behind him, tapping her heel impatiently against the concrete. Billy had picked this particular phone because he hadn’t thought it would be busy, but she’s standing behind him, arms crossed, looking irritated.

“Hi,” Harrington says, sounding tinny and a little far away through the phone.

“I’m in Hawkins,” Billy says. He knows that no one’s told Harrington that because even through the phone he can hear the way Harrington sucks in a sharp breath.

“Jesus,” Harrington says, and Billy misses him like he’s a part of Billy’s body, can see the way he’s probably nervously licking his lip, the way he’s twisting the phone cord around his fingers. “What the fuck are you doing in Hawkins?”

Billy looks at the woman tapping her heel and looks at the shithole town around him. He thinks about Max and her wide eyes. He thinks about Eleven and her bright smile. He thinks about Hopper and the way he had all but dragged Billy out of that diner last night. He thinks of all the people in his life this last year, not the least of them Harrington, who have stepped between Billy and the freight train of his anger again and again and again. He wonders when he became the kind of person people stepped in front of trains for.

He’s halfway between the center of town and the Hargrove house. He knows that’s his next stop, can feel Mike’s car keys heavy in his pocket, can picture the yellow door. He isn’t sure what he wants out of the visit, but he knows he needs to go there anyway, he can’t keep waiting for all of his bullshit to just get better.

"I think I need to see my dad," Billy says, and he hears the breath that Harrington sucks in again. "If you keep breathing like that you're going to give yourself hiccups," Billy adds when the silence stretches longer.

"I don't think that's how it works," Harrington says. "Are you all right?"

I'm always fine, Billy thinks, but doesn't say, because he almost never is. "You make me feel really fucking happy," Billy says instead of answering. It's true. Harrington finding him in that police station is the best thing that's ever happened to him, for every bump and bruise that's come between them, for the week spent sleeping on the floor in August, for all the nights Billy's prowled Chicago, there's always been a truth there, too, that *he has a home*. That he has his own home, with Harrington. Having that home involves visiting Hawkins, sometimes.

Billy thinks it might be nice if he could do it without falling to pieces every single time. Harrington makes him feel happy. Billy loves the life they have together. Harrington makes him feel happy, but Billy's pretty sure that there's more work he needs to do on himself to really be happy.

"Good," Harrington answers, "You make me happy too. Billy, what are you doing?"

Billy lights a cigarette and thinks about his answer, listens to the woman behind him tapping her heel on the concrete, click, click, click. Somewhere a car horn honks. Over Hawkins, the sky is bright blue and the sun is sharp and cold. Billy remembers falling down a staircase and feeling like he could never get up, like maybe he didn't want to. He remembers getting up anyway.

"I've got one more night," Billy reminds him. "Three days, right?"

"Yeah," Harrington breathes out. "Jesus. I would've come with you."

"I hate Christmas," Billy says, knows he's rambling a little, hopes he isn't scaring Harrington too much. "I don't, really, though. I hate my dad, and I don't even really hate him. I'm so fucking mad at myself

all the time, Steve.” Billy mumbles that last part, “Because I’ve spent a lot of time thinking I did something fucking wrong, you know? And that’s why she left and that’s why he didn’t want me, but he did want Max, you know? I really fucking thought it was me.”

“Who is she?” Harrington asks, then, a little urgently, “Billy, it isn’t--that’s not how it--”

“I know,” Billy says, cutting him off, “I get it. I’m just tying up loose ends.”

“You’re not going to kill your dad, are you?” Harrington asks, and it sounds like a joke, but also like he might really be asking.

“No,” Billy says through a smile, running a hand through his hair. “Although if I was like El I probably would have when I was seventeen. I’ll see you tomorrow, ok? I’m coming home soon.”

“What? El? What do you--how do you--?”

But Billy hangs up the phone, laughs a little bit because he can picture Harrington sputtering and swearing in their hallway in Chicago. He drops the rest of his quarters at the feet of the woman waiting behind him. “For your patience,” he says, blows a little smoke in her face, and then he walks back down to the borrowed car, settles into the seat, turns it on, and drives to his father’s house.

It doesn’t look any different.

Susan’s flowers are dead from the cold, but Billy remembers her planting them, and he’s pretty sure they’re the type that keep coming back no matter how dead it seems they are. He’s never really thought of himself as the kind of person who identifies with flowers before, but he’s learning a lot about himself this trip and he empathizes with those flowers, keeps coming back.

He thinks about Eleven and the clenched fist she’d held at her heart, the angry expression she’d twisted her face into, thinks of the way she’d uncurled her fist with purpose, and how it had become a thumbs up.

Billy breathes out slowly, walks up the crumbling steps. Remembers,

before getting his arm broken, a hot day in early June, a sunburn spreading across his back as he tried to clean the steps up. Billy had been shirtless and sweating, from the sun and from the heat of his father's gaze, his terse directions as he told Billy to move the stone to the left, a little more, not that much, did he have to do everything himself? His dad had shouldered him out of the way, fixed the stone, looked at Billy, that's the ticket, he'd said, and then he'd smiled at someone just behind Billy, called out a greeting to a neighbor. For a second, that smile had almost seemed like it was for him.

Billy walks up to the front step and the porch door, swings it open and it whines the same as it always has when he pulls it. He curls his fingers around his necklace. The front door is still yellow. He can't see through the frosted glass. He listens for a second, trying to hear what's on the other side, but there's no sounds that he can make out.

Billy shifts his weight a little nervously, raises his hand, knocks.

Susan answers.

Her eyes go wide so fast that Billy almost laughs, would laugh if he weren't so terrified. "Hi," Billy says.

"Uh," says Susan, and Billy knows suddenly where Max got her own little *uh* from. "Billy, how nice to--we weren't expecting--"

"Susan?" it's the first time Billy's heard his dad's voice in a while. He thinks about leaving. He doesn't. "Who's at the door?"

Susan turns around, "It's Billy," she says, over her shoulder. "One second, Billy, your father's coming." Billy feels something crack in his chest when she doesn't invite him inside. He stands there on the front step of the house he used to live in, the air chilly behind him, and waits for--something.

All at once, Susan shuffles away from the door and his father stands in front of him.

Billy thinks he looks smaller. It's been nearly a year since Billy's laid eyes on his father. He looms much larger in Billy's memories of him.

His dad looks smaller, but that doesn't make Billy feel any less afraid.

He swallows, says, "Hi," but his voice cracks. Billy licks his lips, swallows again, says, "Hi, dad," and it's sounds close enough to normal that he doesn't repeat himself for a third time.

Something tightens in his father's jaw and Billy thinks it looks a lot like staring into a mirror. He feels a little sick. His dad says, oblivious apparently, to everything happening behind Billy's eyes, "What do you want? Do you need money? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Billy almost says yes. When he was younger, when he lived with his dad, sometimes he would argue. The reaction it got wasn't always the same, and back then Billy might dig his heels in, hoping that this time it would be normal. The night he almost killed Steve Harrington, Billy had dug in, had said that Susan and his dad were late, had gotten slammed against the shelves for his trouble, had carried a bruise on his cheekbone for days.

He almost says yes, wants to know what his father would do if his piece of shit son showed up a year later asking for help. He can feel the urge on the tip of his tongue, the old impulse to see if maybe this time, maybe this time the whole thing would just--would be normal.

He swallows it down. "No," Billy says to the second two questions. He's still not really sure what he wants, so he leaves that one hanging open in the air between them.

For a long, awkward moment, they stare at each other. Billy can see the decision to close the door happen, watches the way his dad shifts to shut it. "Wait," Billy says, one hand out against yellow wood. His dad's eyes flinch to it, and Billy can see a version of this that ends with a bruising grip around his wrist, with a shove that would send him stumbling backwards down the steps. "Did mom ever call you?" Billy asks.

If his dad is startled by the question, it doesn't show on his face. "No," he says after a short pause, eyes searching Billy's face for half a second, like he's curious, but not--invested. "I got the divorce papers in the mail. There was no return address."

Billy nods. That makes sense, he supposes. She would disappear and just--just be gone. He remembers that day, the click click click of her

heels, a pattern to her step he thinks he'd still recognize. He's never heard any set of high heeled footsteps that sound exactly like her. He can hear the sounds of the day, her heels, the thump of the suitcase--the car horn. The question is out almost before he fully thinks it, "Who picked her up that day?" he asks, a little desperate, so close to solving a mystery that's hung at the edges of his consciousness since he ran to the window and there was no one outside on a hot June day when he was fifteen years old. "From the house. Who picked her up?"

His dad does look a little confused now, but not--angry. He looks at Billy and then looks away, somewhere to the left of Billy's ear, and Billy had never known he'd gotten that move from his dad, but he knows it now. "A cab," his dad says finally. "An old checker cab." His dad's eyes move back toward him then, sharper, a little irritated. "Why are you here? What do you want?" he asks again.

"Nothing," Billy answers, surprised at how much he means it. "Nothing I just--Merry Christmas, or whatever," he says.

There are still questions, of course. Billy can feel them bouncing around in his skull. He wonders what his bedroom looks like, thinks about asking if he can see it, doesn't know if he can handle whatever the answer is, even if his dad does let him in. His mom left in a cab a long time ago, now, and Billy has always wondered why she didn't take him with her. He knows his dad can't answer that question for him, any more than Billy thinks he'd be able to explain why he spent the last two and half years Billy lived with him beating the shit out of him. Maybe there aren't answers for shit like that.

He thinks his dad is an asshole and fucked up and a mean son of a bitch, but he doesn't have to--Billy doesn't have to be like him, and doesn't have to have him in his life. Doesn't have to hold onto the anger, can learn, maybe, to let it go and leave it behind, like he's been left behind, maybe. Max he'll keep, his stupid little sister, but the rest of this--it's all just bullshit.

"Bye, dad," he says. He's not surprised when his dad shuts the door in his face. Behind the door he can hear Susan, "Neil, we should have invited him inside," but he doesn't hear whatever his dad says to her, because he's walking back down the steps and climbing into Mike

Wheeler's car.

He drives three streets away from his father's house before he pulls over, gets out of the car and sinks down on the side of the road, his head between his knees, Hawkins cold around him. When he's done shaking, when his stomach settles, Billy gets back into the car and drives to the Wheeler's. He leaves the car outside and stashes the keys in a plant like Max told him to do.

His stomach rumbles. It's been hours since breakfast. He's lost a lot of the day and isn't really sure where it went. It disappeared behind a yellow door, maybe. Like Billy will never do again. He remembers coming home from school, the adrenaline thrumming in his bones on the days he couldn't be sure if his father was home. These memories come without sound, just blurry images of his father, suddenly smaller, and the feeling like the walls were closing in around him. Billy lights a cigarette, inhales deeply, exhales smoke and blurry memories, shakes out his arms and looks at Hawkins all around him.

December is dark so early, even the mid afternoon, it is already getting dark. He goes to a fast food place for a late lunch, calls Hopper to tell him he's not staying there tonight, and spends the rest of the day reading books he used to, hiding in the most abandoned stacks in the public library until they kick him out at closing.

He doesn't call Harrington, yet. He keeps this to himself for just a little bit longer.

~

This, he knows, is probably a mistake, but it's a little bit after 9pm when Billy rings the doorbell of the house. There's no sound behind it, then footsteps. The door sounds heavy when it swings open, and it is, probably. It's huge and ornate and bright. Expensive.

If Mr. Harrington is surprised to see him, it doesn't show at all on his face.

"Darling!" Mr. Harrington calls back into the house. Billy hears the lighter approaching footsteps of Harrington's mom, the click click click of the smaller heels she wears around the house. "Steve's *friend*

is here.”

“Billy!” says Mrs. Harrington, shouldering her husband out of the way and smiling at him. “We weren’t expecting you at all this ye--” she stops, seems to be thinking for a second, looks a little embarrassed, “This early,” she settles on, and Billy feels like he’s missing something. “What a nice surprise! What can we do for you, sweetheart?”

Billy thinks of lying, of saying nevermind, he’d just wanted to say hi, but he also told Hopper he wasn’t staying there tonight and he’s not sure that Mike Wheeler would take kindly to finding Billy sleeping in his car the next morning. “I didn’t expect to be in Hawkins, Mrs. Harrington,” he admits, “And uh, I don’t really stay with my dad when I’m in town. Can I--can--” he hates asking for favors.

“You’ll stay in Steve’s room,” Mrs. Harrington cuts him off, tone firm, ushering him inside. “The bed is all made up. I always like to have it ready in case my boy is in town unexpectedly. Mr. Harrington and I were just getting ready for bed, but you should of course make yourself at home. You know where everything is by now, I’m sure,” she beams at him when she finally stops speaking, and Billy just--stares for a second, speechless at her warm hospitality, at the ease with which she tells him to make himself at home.

Harrington’s parents love Harrington, Billy’s always known that and he knows that Harrington knows it too. They show it in different ways, sure, than someone like Joyce Byers or Hopper, but Billy’s never really felt the full brunt of parental affection before directed at him and him alone, and he just sort of blinks at her for a second before he strings together a “thank you,” and is guided with warm, manicured hands on his shoulders up the stairs. She brushes his shoulders off once they’re standing in the doorway, “Such a nice surprise,” she says. “Steve’s father and I--we must come visit you two soon, I think.” Harrington’s parents never talk about them as a *them*, Billy’s pretty sure they only use the word *friend*, but her warm acceptance, her expensive smelling, perfumed hand gently patting his cheek, it’s--really nice.

“Uh,” he says, sounding like Max or maybe Susan. Maybe himself.

“Goodnight, then, sweetheart,” Mrs. Harrington says, covering his awkwardness with the elegant ease of good manners. “Will you be joining us for breakfast in the morning?”

“No,” Billy says, “Uh, but thank you. I have an early bus.”

“How are you getting to the station? I’m sure Mr. Harrington can drive you if you need.”

Harrington’s dad is always cordial, if withdrawn. Billy can think of few things that sound more terrible than the long drive out to the bus station in a silent car with Mr. Harrington. He shakes his head, “No, thank you, ma’am,” he says, “Dustin is going to get me. I’ll be gone before either of you wake up.”

“Oh those children,” she says, wrinkling her nose, but there’s something fond about it. “That’s *dear* of him, really. I hope he’s a good driver. Well, you sleep well then, Billy.”

“Thanks again, Mrs. Harrington. I’ll see you in a few weeks for Christmas.”

That weird, caught expression flits across her face. She looks just like Harrington when he’s trying--and failing--to keep a secret. “Yes,” she says after a weirdly long pause, “Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Billy answers, and he shuts the door as she and her perfume float down the hallway. Billy peels off his clothes, turns off the light, and crawls into Harrington’s bed. Hawkins is all around him, and it’s--heavy, still, to feel it. He shuts his eyes and lies sprawled out on his back, wishing he could just be better, knowing he’s trying. He doesn’t think he’ll have a nightmare tonight, but he feels restless like Harrington always acts before he has one, so maybe one is coming.

Hawkins is pressing down around him. It makes him squirm.

Billy exhales, rolls onto his stomach and scrubs both hands over his face. Hawkins is--complicated, but there’s a lightening of sorts when he thinks about Eleven, thinks about Mrs. Harrington, thinks about Nancy, thinks about--most of all--Harrington. All these people who

come from this place, who have helped Billy become a different kind of someone this last year. Loving. Loved.

He's grabbing the phone he knows is on the table next to the bed before he really thinks it through.

"I can't believe you have a phone in your bedroom," he says when Harrington answers.

There's a pause, then, "Billy. Are you *in* my bedroom?"

"Yes. I'm on the run from the law. I murdered my father. I thought Hopper might not check here."

"That's not funny," Harrington says. Billy thinks it's actually hilarious. As if Hopper wouldn't look for Billy somewhere that is Steve's first. "Do you want me to come there?" Harrington adds, a little softer.

It's such a fucking nice thing to offer and if Billy weren't lying in bed, he'd fall over from how readily Harrington offers it. "No, babe," Billy says, "I'm fine. I'll be home tomorrow. I just--" *didn't want you to worry*, Billy almost says, because he really doesn't want Harrington to spend all night worrying. That seems too honest, though. Billy's a little embarrassed by it, "I just wanted to make sure you're--" *sleeping ok*, he almost says. Fuck, everything he wants to say is so *domestic*.

"Not eating all of the last of those cookies Lucas's mom sent us?" Harrington asks, covering for Billy. Something warm blooms in Billy's stomach, but it isn't anything like anger. It isn't anything close to rotten.

"You're eating them, aren't you?" Billy asks.

"Of course I fucking am," Harrington answers, "You disappeared on some sort of--some sort of *pilgrimage* to Hawkins for three days! I'm eating the cookies."

"I'm ok," Billy promises him. "But you might not be if I get back and there aren't any cookies left. I'm ok, though. Really."

There's a sound at the other end of the phone. It takes Billy a second

to realize Harrington is chewing, *very loudly*, presumably on a cookie. "You weren't doing so good before you left," Harrington says, his mouth full. It's so rude. It would make Harrington's mother die to hear it. The ridiculousness of it makes the conversation a little easier for Billy to swallow, and he's grateful for it.

"I know," Billy says, "Sorry. Christmas has been a lot for me, in the past."

"We don't have to do a big thing," Harrington says. "You should have told me."

"No," Billy says, "I-like holidays with your family. I just needed to get my head on straight first."

Harrington is quiet for a second. Billy listens to him chew for a bit, which is gross. Then Harrington says, slowly, like he's testing the waters. "Billy--earlier you said," he stops, and Billy can picture him trying to say the words, "On the phone. You said she left. Who's she?"

"My mom," Billy admits, and his voice doesn't waver or crack. "She left when I was fifteen."

"Shit," Harrington says. He doesn't say *I'm sorry*, and Billy is grateful.

"When I get back to Chicago," Billy says, "You're going to tell me what really happened to you. I know it wasn't just something with the pool. Eleven says--"

Harrington hangs up on him then, suddenly, and Billy calls him back three times before Harrington hisses that he can't be sure the phones aren't tapped and hangs up *again*. Billy is *almost* one hundred percent sure he's joking.

~

Dustin pulls up outside the Harrington's house at 5:25am the next morning while Billy is standing on the front steps trying to figure out if he has enough cash on him for a cab. The car pulls up, and it's actually pretty weird because Billy never asked him for a ride. Billy squints. Dustin's in the passenger seat--Will Byers is driving,

apparently.

They both wave when they see Billy looking, and Billy walks down the front lawn to the car a little cautiously. Will rolls down the window when Billy hesitates about a foot away. "Hi!" he says, leaning over Dustin.

"Hi?" Billy asks.

Dustin rolls his eyes and Will smacks Dustin's arm. "*Dustin*," he snaps, and then, to Billy, "El," like that answers Billy's question. It actually kind of does. Billy climbs into the back seat and jostles at Dustin until he scoots the seat up. Billy sprawls across the back, feels Will looking at him in the rearview mirror, stares out the window and pretends he doesn't notice Dustin practically breaking his back turning around to get a good look.

Will coughs. "I'm a very good driver," he says, slowly, and Billy is immediately suspicious. "It's just that I'm not really--supposed to drive yet?"

"Why isn't he driving?" Billy asks, pointing at Dustin.

"Because I don't think we should be driving *you*," Dustin answers, and Will hisses his name again and smacks his shoulder. "Ow, Will, what the fuck."

"Stop it," Will says, then turns around to half-smile at Billy. "My not exactly step dad is the chief," he explains. "I'm not gonna get in trouble. Besides, I'm the best driver."

Dustin huffs and faces forward, but Billy can see him cross his arms and slump down in the seat, a sort of acquiescence.

Billy wishes he'd made himself a cup of coffee before he got out here. He wonders how much about him Eleven knows now and how much of it has been shared over radios. He thumps his head back against the seat.

"I could drive?" he offers.

"No!" Dustin snaps at the same time Will says, "I've got it, thank

you.”

Billy thumps his head against the seat again and resigns himself to his fate. “Ok,” he says, “Thank you.” He wonders if he can smoke in the car with *two* teenagers, decides the answer to that question is probably no.

It’s weird, he thinks as they drive away from the Harrington house, creeping back through a still dark and mostly silent Hawkins, the air feels different this morning. Not exactly lighter, he guesses, but a different kind of heavy. Maybe Billy just feels less like he’s rotting from the inside out.

They drive through the center of town, past the diner, past one of the turns that Billy could take to go to his father’s house. He pictures having the ability to tear the walls down around his father’s ears. He’s a little relieved that the idea hasn’t lost any of its appeal. He’d still do it if he could. His eyes still stare down that road and he pictures a yellow door, trapping him inside and locking him outside. Until recently, Billy realizes he hadn’t been sure which was worse. Now he knows.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and it’s easier to say now than it was to say to Hopper. Billy wonders if it’s the kids or something in him that makes it feel easier.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Will says.

“Yes he does!” Dustin exclaims at the same time as Billy say, “Yes I do.”

The agreement shocks the two of them into complete silence. Will laughs.

The silence stretches for a few minutes, but then Will takes his hands off the wheel and his eyes off the road to shove Dustin, and Billy and Dustin both swear, and Dustin says, begrudgingly, “Apology accepted.”

Billy shifts so he’s less sprawled and more sitting up. “How uh,” he says, “How did your lab report go?”

Dustin tells him. It takes up almost the entire drive.

A few miles out from the bus station, though, the car gets silent again, and Will says, "Listen," and there's something serious in his tone, so Billy sits up. Dustin is looking at Will with wide eyes. "A while ago," Will says, "I went missing. Something bad happened to me, but it happened to my friends too." Dustin is making a lot of very fast *shhhhhhh* motions with his hands, but he doesn't actually interrupt Will. "People died," Will says, very soft. "And none of us really knew how to get better until we did." He looks away from the road again--he is definitely not a good driver, Billy is going to die in this car--"That's kind of how it works. You don't know how to get better until you know. And then you work on it."

Billy thinks that a kid shouldn't sound that grown up, shouldn't know as much about life lessons as he does, because Billy sure as fuck hasn't got life that figured out. "Anyway," Will says. "The thing I actually wanted to say is I'm seeing--someone. A boy. And it's--" he stops, shrugs, "It's been nice to see what that could look like watching you and Steve, I guess."

Billy makes fun of Harrington all the time because he blushes. Like just turns red sometimes, and it's hilarious, and it makes Harrington blush harder when Billy calls him out on it. In this moment, in the back of Mike Wheeler's car with Will Byers driving, Billy is so glad that Harrington isn't here, because he knows he must look like a tomato.

And then he remembers Dustin, sees the look on his face and groans because there's no way Harrington isn't going to hear about it.

"I need to go home," he says, more seriously than he intends, to the ceiling of the car.

"That's what the bus is for," Dustin informs him helpfully as they pull up outside the station.

There's an awkward moment where Billy isn't sure how saying goodbye works. Harrington hugs them, usually. Are they in a hugging place? He settles for doing the weird handshake thing with Dustin and ruffling a bemused Will's hair. Then he gets out of the car.

They don't drive away until he's inside the platform entrance. It's kind of nice, honestly.

Overhead, someone says the next bus to Chicago is departing in five minutes. Billy shoulders his bag and looks backwards, his eyes following the road that would take him back to Hawkins. He's not--done with that place yet, and the thought of it makes him feel a little sick, a little scared. He has to come back in two weeks, but he won't be doing it alone and it--it doesn't make him feel rotten or out of control to picture it. He'll take the wins where he can get them.

The announcer calls a second warning, and Billy jogs up the steps. It's time to go the fuck home.

4. Chicago

Steve is sitting at the kitchen table, knees tucked to his chest, a mug of coffee balanced precariously on top of them. He's supporting it with one palm as he stares out the kitchen window. It's been a long time since the sun had cracked the cold Chicago night open, and the icy blue light of a December morning floods the kitchen. He can see most of the street around them, is enjoying watching the lights blink on as everyone else wakes up. It's peaceful, in a way. Steve likes the feeling of peace.

Three days is not that long, he knows, but a lot has changed since Billy had come home from work on Steve's bad day and they'd reheated Lucas's mom's soup on the stove. Three days is just a part of the year they've been together, but three days in Hawkins feels different. Three days in Hawkins alone feels--longer, somehow or maybe just more important, although Steve isn't sure why. Hawkins makes him nervous, reminds him of running, and chasing, of being chased, of the sound of a bat slicing through the air, but it doesn't haunt him in the same way it haunts Billy. He's never thought about it much beyond knowing that Hawkins is hard for Billy, too. He hadn't really considered as much as he should have, maybe, that Hawkins is real for Billy in a way Steve's shit isn't real anymore.

He'd forgotten, last night, to ask Billy what time his bus was coming in. Steve had wanted to pick him up, had a rough plan of being there for him. He hadn't asked, though. He hadn't even remembered to ask until nearly 2am, when Steve had been lying in bed, thinking about how cold it was without Billy--who is a fucking furnace, holy shit--there to make it warm. He'd been lying in bed, and then he'd sat up with the kind of sick certainty that comes at 2am when the brain remembers something it forgot, and pressed his face into his hands. "Shit," he'd mumbled. Then he'd gone back to sleep.

So it's early in the morning, but not too early, and the day stretches out before Steve empty of commitment. He wonders if he'll spend all of it here, with his knees tucked against his chest and the fingers of his free hand drumming on the wood of their kitchen table.

Billy knows about Eleven, which means the rest of the answers will

have to come soon, too. Steve pictures a flower-faced monster with rows of teeth, and it's not that it doesn't scare him anymore, but that it scares him differently. More distantly. It's the memory of fear and not it's imminent threat, the year of his life that sometimes wraps him in dread and drags him down. He always resurfaces. Drumming his fingers on the table, he thinks about how raw he felt when he first came to Chicago, how he was scared and free all at once. How he had three years to get himself right before he met Billy, and Nancy to call every night he couldn't sleep, and Hopper to ask *why*, and parents who loved him even if they didn't understand. A year is a long time, three is even longer. Billy hasn't--Billy's barely had that.

Now, Steve guesses, he's had three days. He knows about Eleven. He's seen his father. He's been back in Hawkins alone, and Steve aches to know Billy had to do this, but his cheeks flush red with anger at himself, with embarrassment, to realize that he hadn't--hadn't *thought* about what Hawkins must be like for Billy with any sort of depth. Billy had to go away for Steve to realize it and Steve hadn't been there for him. Not on this trip, which Billy hadn't wanted, but on every other trip back to Hawkins. Steve hadn't really been there for him, he knows it now. A year is a long time, but not he guesses, long enough for him to loosen and lose every selfish habit built up in him through years of being an only child, a sort of king in a small town. He has to be there for Billy now. And he's going to be--that's part of operation SHC, and he's excited to get to make this holiday that's something of an anniversary completely theirs.

He takes a long, slow sip from the mug of coffee. This one had been from Lucas, who'd scrawled *This coffee is making me awesome* on it in permanent marker that's nearly faded from years of use. Steve has gotten a lot of shitty mugs as presents over the years, he thinks. Maybe he should start making a wishlist or something.

From somewhere way deep down in the building there's the quiet, echoing crash thump of the door to the street opening. Steve goes still in his chair and listens to the sounds of footsteps on the stairs. Every inch of him feels taut, waiting, like this could turn out to be Luis from down the hall running errands early, and not--

The click of the key in the lock, the awkward thunk their door makes when it opens--they really need to fix it--and then Billy's standing

there, framed in the light of the hallway, unzipping that winter coat and smiling at Steve, a little tired.

“Hey,” Billy says.

“Hi,” Steve answers.

And then he’s scrambling, a little, to put the mug down, to cross the apartment, to reach out and touch him. Steve crowds into his space, palms against Billy’s cheeks, and there’s a moment where he’s just looking into Billy’s eyes and feeling the cold air Billy’s brought in the apartment with him. Breathing in the smell of cigarettes and shampoo. For a frozen second, Steve stands with centimeters between them and marvels at how good just--this--can feel. Billy drops his bag, Steve can hear it hit the floor with a soft *thump* and then Billy’s fingers push up under the back of his shirt, cold where they press into the small of Steve’s back, crowding him in closer.

“Harrington,” Billy says, sounding a little impatient. It’s him and not Steve who closes the space between them.

Steve’s lips part almost the second Billy kisses him, and the press of Billy’s mouth to his is possessive, a little needy. Steve feels like every inch of him is in tune to where Billy touches him, the pads of his fingers against the small of Steve’s back, his lips still cold, but warming against Steve’s, the drag of his tongue across Steve’s lower lip even as Billy is backing them up, up, up, until Steve’s knees hit the couch and he collapses down onto it. Billy moves with him, straddles Steve’s lap and barely breaks the kiss to do it. Steve pushes up into him,

Billy’s hand cradles his jaw, and when he pulls back Steve can only look up at him through half lidded eyes, feels loose and taut all at once, like his muscles can’t remember what to do. Billy’s breathing hard, his pupils are a little blown, but it’s the red of his lips that pools warmth in Steve’s stomach, makes him slide a hand back into Billy’s hair and pull him down, makes him slide his tongue past Billy’s lips.

Billy puts his hand on Steve’s chest, pushes him back gently, kisses the corner of his mouth, drags his lips over Steve’s cheek, presses a

final kiss to his forehead. Steve's panting, sliding his hands down from Billy's hair over his side, pushing up under his t-shirt. Billy huffs a laugh when Steve scratches his fingertips over his ribs--he's always been a little ticklish.

"I told you," Billy murmurs, ducking his head to catch Steve in a kiss that is soft and sweet and too short. "Three days."

"Were you gone?" Steve asks, curling his hand in the front of Billy's t-shirt, keeping him close. "I didn't notice."

Billy laughs again, rolls off Steve and collapses on the couch next to him. Steve shifts a little, enough to plaster himself to Billy's side, throws his legs across Billy's lap and drops his cheek so it's half leaning on Billy's shoulder. "Jesus, Harrington," Billy says, hand coming to rest on Steve's knee, "You're needy."

Steve knows it for the joke that it is, laughs quietly against Billy's shoulder, and brushes his fingertips across Billy's knuckles where they rest on his knee.

When the door had opened, when Steve had flown across the room, when he had wanted anything but space between them, Steve hadn't really taken the time to look at Billy, to see what Hawkins had written on his skin. He does now, though, traces his fingers over knuckles unblemished by any tell-tale bruising.

He shifts, lifts himself up enough that he can look at Billy, who is looking back at him with an expression on his face that's hard to read. There's no bruising there, either, no split lip or staining from a bloody nose. Billy looks tired, like he hasn't slept well, but other than that there's just--Billy's face and his strange, almost quiet expression. Steve isn't sure what it means.

"I'm all right," Billy says. He doesn't look away and Steve holds his gaze, searching for--for something. For that old and angry thing that he'd seen the night Billy had woken him up before he went out, for that hooded, hurt thing that was sometimes there when they stood at the bus station in Hawkins, not touching, the thing in Billy's eyes Steve is realizing he'd always seen and just--ignored. He's looking for something in Billy's eyes that should make him nervous, or worried,

but Billy's eyes are just warm and blue and familiar. He says that he's all right. Steve believes him.

"Ok," he breathes out, dropping back down and curling against Billy on the couch. Billy's hand squeezes Steve's thigh and Steve lies there, eyes closed, on the precipice of sleep when--

"I think we should talk," Billy murmurs, and he's giving Steve an out with his near whisper, would let Steve pretend to be asleep, would let Steve skip this conversation.

It's that, more than anything, that reminds Steve of how selfish he's been about Hawkins and the past that Billy faces there. He sits up, "Yeah," Steve murmurs back, looking at Billy, "Ok."

Billy pushes at his legs. Steve huffs a little, crossing his arms, but he still lifts himself off Billy's lap. Billy stands up and holds his hands out. Steve takes them, lets Billy pull him to his feet.

"What--"

"Can we talk outside?" Billy interrupts, and for the first time that morning he ducks Steve's gaze.

"Yes," Steve says before Billy's even finished speaking. Billy's always loved the cold for the way it clears his head, Steve knows. "Let me just," he motions down at his long sleeved t-shirt, the shorts he'd been sitting in, and Billy nods, but doesn't say anything. He drops Steve's hands and moves to the window. For a heartbeat, Steve watches him, the way he leans down to push the window up, the way that once he gets outside he kicks some lingering snow and ice off the fire escape.

"Harrington," Billy says, rolling his eyes when he catches Steve staring. "Go change. It's cold out here."

So Steve goes back into the bedroom, pulls on a sweater and a pair of sweatpants, stomps his feet into his warm boots, and walks back out into the living room. When he's shimmied out the window onto the fire escape, he hears his breath catch a little, can't help it, love brushing over every inch of his skin, making him shiver from the

intensity of it and not the cold.

Months ago, now, Steve had sat on a different fire escape in his socks, half frozen from the temperature, watching the rain beat down against the alley below. He'd thought about all the moments he and Billy had bumped up against each other in passing when they were still in high school. He'd remembered the day Hopper had dragged Billy out of the building kicking and screaming. He'd remembered all the predictions every shitty little person in Hawkins had made about Billy's future, and he'd hoped that every single one of them had been wrong. He'd hoped that Billy would come home. To him.

This is a different fire escape, a different season, a different forecast. The Billy sitting in front of him is a different Billy, but he grew from that teenager who everyone had whispered would crash and burn. He thinks that none of them, not one person in that fucking town--him included, the him in high school who had been afraid almost all of the time--could have guessed *this*.

Billy's sitting slumped with his back against the red brick of their building. He's got a cigarette hanging from his lips, one arm thrown casually over the side of the fire escape. He's sitting on a blanket, there's another one thrown over him, and when he looks up at Steve, still standing there and staring like an asshole, struck by how beautiful Billy is, and how much of Steve's world he has become, he lifts the hand he'd been trailing through the empty air and flicks back the corner of the blanket. "Come here," he says, "It's freezing."

Steve moves like a magnet toward him, slips under the blanket and tucks himself against Billy's side. Billy's positioned them so his body is between Steve and the rest of the world, does it so instinctively that Steve thinks his heart might burst in his chest. He feels safe and loved and warm, and he wants to give that feeling to Billy, too, aware now that he loves Billy and Billy knows it, but that maybe Billy doesn't always feel safe.

"Hey," Steve whispers, cracking the silence that has stretched too long, now. He presses his nose against Billy's cheek, chasing warmth, but Billy's been outside long enough that his skin turned cold. "You built a blanket nest on the fire escape."

"You always complain that it's uncomfortable," Billy answers, and Steve pulls back enough that he can see that Billy's fingers are shaking when he pulls the cigarette away from his lips to exhale smoke. For once in his fucking life, Steve tries to exercise patience, to wait Billy out like Billy always waits for him.

Billy moves weirdly, for a second, and there's a heartbeat where Steve thinks he's moving *away* and his stomach sinks, but then from Billy's other side, Billy's still trembling fingers produce a bottle of whiskey. "Hold this," he says, passing Steve the cigarette, and Steve takes a long drag to quiet his nerves, to remind himself that this isn't fucking about him. He watches Billy tip his head back, take a pull from the bottle long enough that Steve's throat burns in sympathy. Billy licks his lips when he passes the bottle to Steve, takes the cigarette back, grins.

"It's a little early," Steve hears himself say, even as he takes a sip from the bottle himself, feels the alcohol burn all the way down and the pool warm in his stomach. He imagines he can feel the heat of it spreading from his core out to his toes, the tips of his ears. Steve caps it, shoves it under the blankets between them, searches out Billy's free hand and wraps both of his around it. He squeezes, both of their fingers cold, and listens to the silence of Billy breathing and smoking and the thrum of the city around them.

"Will has a boyfriend," Billy says, which is not the sentence Steve was expecting, and which startles him enough that he chokes a little on air, coughing.

"That's great," he says and means it, but doesn't really understand why Billy's bringing it up.

"He told me when he and Dustin were driving me to the bus station this morning," Billy continues. He's looking away from Steve, now, and Steve stares resolutely at the profile of Billy's face, at the sudden tightness of his jaw. "He said it helped to see--" Billy pauses, swallows hard, "Us," and then stops again, his jaw clenched tight. Steve doesn't really get it, but he is learning to be patient. He squeezes Billy's hand in his, waits. "I've never--" Billy stops again, shakes his head like he's shaking something off, "I've never been the kind of person some kid would look up to. Fuck, Harrington, until--

what--eight months ago? I was getting into fights with strangers after fucking their wives."

Steve had known that, has known it for a long time, and also knows-- "Fights, sure," he says, "But Billy you haven't--the wife, thing. You haven't done that in over a year." Since November, Steve's brain chirps, since the first time you got arrested, since you came back into my life.

"It doesn't matter," Billy says, sounds bitter. "I still did it for such a long fucking time and I don't have a good reason. It was fun. It gave me a *thrill*."

Billy still won't look at him. Steve can't decide if he wants to push closer, crowd into Billy's space until Billy turns to him, or if maybe right now Billy needs to room to say his piece. Steve stays where he is for now, holding Billy's hand, feeling his nose get numb from the cold, but the rest of him is mostly warm under the blankets.

"I used to wonder all the fucking time," Billy says, "If this was done to me. If that person I was in high school was done to me or if it's just who I wanted to be because it was easier to be angry and *mean* than to be hurt and hurting," Billy pauses to grind the cigarette down against the brick of their building, pulls his hand out of Steve's so he can light another one. Steve wonders somewhere in the back of his mind where Billy's ashtray went. Remembers that he broke one, once. Wonders if Billy had ever gotten himself a new one. "But it doesn't fucking matter now," Billy says, "Because I don't want to be that person anymore."

He falls silent and Steve squeezes his hand, says, "You haven't been that person in a while, Billy."

Billy still isn't looking at him. "I don't know," he says, "Maybe." Somewhere down below them, a car honks. It's Billy who jumps at the sound, his hand clenching in Steve's. Steve hisses when Billy's nails dig into the flesh of his palm, and Billy jerks his hand away, looking a little horrified. "Sorry," he says, breathing hard. "That scared me."

Steve rubs his palm and shrugs, glances down at the crescents pressed

into his skin. "It's fine," he says, "It just surprised me." He holds his hand out for Billy to see, but Billy isn't looking at him again. He reaches between them and grabs the whiskey, takes another sip and settled back against the bricks, holding the bottle in one hand and his cigarette in the other. "Harrington," Billy says, "I am sometimes that person. If we're going to be--this--then you need to know that I am sometimes that person."

"You've been bett--"

"Of course I have," Billy says, tipping his head back and closing his eyes. "And you don't have as many nightmares. But you still have them. And sometimes I'm still really fucking angry."

Steve wants to ask him what happened in Hawkins, but he isn't sure if he should. So he doesn't say anything.

"I think you want to believe that I'm--" Billy pauses, searching for the word, "Changed. And I'm *different*, but I'm still. I'm going to sometimes--" he trails off and the sentence hangs in the air between them.

Billy tilts his head to the side, looking at Steve through half lidded eyes, kind of tilting toward him. It reminds Steve, stupidly, of being in the showers with him those first few times in high school, the way everything about Billy seemed to be slanted a little sideways, like he hadn't really learned how to look Steve dead in the face when they were vulnerable like that, naked in the fucking showers. Steve can see that slant on Billy's face, in the way Billy drags his tongue across his lower lip. He seems to be waiting for something, but Steve isn't sure--

Except Billy isn't wrong, is he? Steve had sat in their kitchen only a few days ago, on his bad day, looked into his mug of coffee and thought about how Billy had *unfurled* and how he had *changed*. Steve had projected that normalcy onto Billy, because Billy has spent every day of the last year on a balance beam for Steve, so perfectly weighted, everything Steve needs. He thinks that he hasn't been that for Billy, hasn't adjusted for him in all the same ways that Billy has adjusted for him. He looks at the guarded look on Billy's face. He realizes that Billy isn't *sure* of him. Steve aches.

“Oh,” he says, quietly. Billy flinches. “Fuck,” Steve says, reaching out and closing the space between them enough that he can curl his fingers around Billy’s jaw, “Fuck you,” he says, “Fuck you if you think I don’t want every single fucking part of you,” and he kisses Billy then, and Billy tastes like whiskey and cigarettes and something distinctly Billy.

This kiss is different. When Billy had walked in the door it had been desperate, possessive. It had been about coming back together, reclaiming what they both thought of as theirs.

The Billy he’s kissing now feels small and uncertain, feels brittle to the touch, feels delicate. Steve scoots a little closer, slides his hand around to the back of Billy’s neck and tilts his head for a better angle, deepens the kiss until he feels Billy soften and lean into it. *Fuck you* is maybe not the most romantic declaration Steve’s ever made, but he’s never meant anything more than what he just said. “I’m all in,” Steve mumbles, barely enough space between them for him to form the words. “Jesus, I’m so fucking sorry if you didn’t know that.”

Billy turns his head, looks away again, and something cracks in Steve’s chest because every single time Steve has needed Billy to prop him up, to turn a light on, to curl against him in bed, Steve has known Billy would be there. The look on Billy’s face, the flush of his cheeks, the tension in his shoulders--Billy hadn’t really believed he could expect the same from Steve. Steve feels like a huge fucking asshole. He turns Billy’s face back toward him with the fingers on his jaw, kisses him again, and again, and again until Billy’s arching back against him, pressing closer. Steve doesn’t know how to say he’s sorry again, doesn’t know how to promise Billy with words that he means it when he says he’s all in, hopes that this is enough.

Billy is the one to break the kiss, to pull back a little bit and leave Steve leaning forward, trying to catch his mouth again. He drops his cheek onto Steve’s shoulder, presses in against his side, and Steve knows then that Billy believes him. Steve readjusts his arm, wraps it around Billy and lets Billy curl into his side, drops his cheek to rest on the top of Billy’s head and squeezes him closer. “Billy,” he says after a second, his eyes going wide, “Where did the fucking cigarette go?”

"I think I dropped it," Billy murmurs. Steve spends a second wondering if they're about to burn to death before he decides that the blankets would already have caught fire by now.

He rubs his thumb against Billy's shoulder. "You saw your dad?" he prompts.

"I did," Billy says, his voice so soft that Steve feels like he needs to lean in to hear him. "They didn't even fucking invite me inside," and he laughs then, but it sounds a little bitter and Steve doesn't *understand* that because he's never lived it, but he loves Billy and he understands enough to know that being turned away probably hurt, under all the hatred and all the terrible fucking things, it's still Billy's dad.

Steve doesn't say *I'm sorry* because he knows it doesn't matter if he is and he knows that Billy doesn't need to hear it. "He's an asshole," Steve says, thinking that he could burn Neil Hargrove to the ground without a second's fucking hesitation. He doesn't really know what else to say.

"I thought it would be some--big fucking thing. I don't know," Billy says, "But we talked and then he shut the door in my face." Under Steve's arm, Billy does a half-shrug kind of thing and then says, "I don't think I'll see him again."

"Ok," Steve says, because that's Billy's call and he'll back his play every time. "I'm glad you're home," he says just after. "I missed you."

"I thought you didn't notice I was gone?" Billy asks.

"Don't use my jokes against me," Steve says, "I'd push you, but you'd fall off the fire escape and probably die."

"Splat," Billy agrees, and Steve doesn't know if Billy remembers the time he told Steve to just drop him down the stairs, *bump, bump, bump, splat--problem solved*, but it makes him squeeze Billy's shoulders a little tighter to hear him say it like a joke. "I'm glad I'm home too," Billy says after a second. "It's cold. Lets go inside."

"All right," Steve agrees. He's not sure if that was the whole

conversation they need to have, but it feels like it was probably enough for now.

~

Steve wakes up to the soft sound of Billy breathing too hard, and also because he just got kneed in the hip, and it fucking hurt. He opens his eyes halfway, reaches for Billy automatically, freezes when he hears the hitch in Billy's breath and the soft, scared sound he makes.

Billy is more honest in sleep than Steve's ever seen him awake. He rarely screams when he has nightmares anymore, but the sounds he makes hurt Steve somewhere deep in his chest. Billy practically whimpers, moving his legs again.

Steve sits up in bed and bounces a few times to make the mattress move. "Baby," he says, and it sounds loud to his ears, has to be to wake Billy up. He bounces again, says even louder, "You're asleep. Wake up. You gotta wake up."

Billy does.

He sits up fast in bed all at once. There's a moment where Billy's eyes search the room, his movements frantic, his gaze wild, and then he seems to realize where he is. Billy's shoulders drop. He presses his hands to his face, still breathing too hard. Steve can see his chest heaving.

Steve doesn't reach out for him yet, even though he wants to. Billy doesn't really like to be touched right after he has a nightmare. Steve leans over and turns a light on, pulls his knees to his chest and rests his chin on them. He waits.

Billy's breathing hasn't settled yet. He drops his head and scrubs his fingers through his hair. His shoulders are tense, and Steve can tell his teeth are clenched. It makes him ache when Billy wakes up like this.

The phone rings. Steve jumps a foot in the fucking air when it does.

Billy doesn't move, though, so Steve says, "I'll be right back," and clambors out of bed. The air in their apartment is cold on his skin,

and he wishes halfway to the phone that he'd thought to throw a sweatshirt or something on over his briefs. Maybe he should get a bathrobe. Do people wear those?

"Hello?" he asks once he's grabbed the phone and pressed it to his ear. His voice is a little raspy. He clears his throat and tries again when he's met with silence, "Hello?"

"Tell him," says a familiar voice, sounding not even a little bit tired. "You need to tell him."

"Hi, El," Steve says, feeling exhausted deep in his bones. "What are you talking about?"

"Operation SHC. Tell him."

"It's supposed to be a--"

"No," she snaps, nearly a shout. Steve has never heard her sound so angry, he shuts his mouth in surprise. "He's *hurting*," El continues. "Tell him."

"How do you--"

"I snooped," El says. Steve pauses, blinks at the wall. Steve has heard Eleven confess to listening and looking and learning a thousand times, has heard her apologize for it, has heard her get in trouble with friends for it. Steve has never once actually heard her sound *guilty* about doing it until this moment. "I needed to," she adds, sounding a little defensive in the face of Steve's silence.

"Ok," Steve says. He wonders if Hopper knows that El's making phone calls at two in the morning. "Ok. I'll tell him."

"Now," Eleven adds. It sounds like a demand.

Steve looks back toward the bedroom door when he hears the floorboards creak. Billy's standing there. He's pulled on a pair of sweatpants, but not a shirt. His cheeks are a little flushed and his shoulders are a little hunched, but he leans against the doorframe

and looks at Steve through his eyelashes, and Steve's heart swells at the sight of Billy standing there, just waiting for Steve to come back to bed.

"Now," Steve promises her. Then, "I got you." He's speaking to El, but he's talking to Billy, can't drag his eyes away from the figure in the doorway. Billy's breathing is still a little irregular. Steve can see it in the stuttered rise and fall of his chest. Billy's trying to project calm, but his grip on the doorframe is white-knuckled. His eyes dart around the room, a little nervous.

"Goodnight, Steve," Eleven says into his ear. He barely murmurs his own *goodnight* before he's hanging up the phone.

"Who was that?" Billy asks, and his eyes are still roaming the room, barely focusing on Steve.

Steve thinks it's kind of a silly question, but he considers the sheer number of people who seem to call one of the two of them in the middle of the night with Something Important to say and decides to answer.

"El." He's still looking at Billy, who looks tight and a little frightened, so vulnerable that Steve wonders how he could have missed the trust Billy puts in him. There aren't many people, Steve is willing to guess, who get to see Billy looking vulnerable.

Steve reaches out for the lightswitch, turns the hallway light off, doesn't once look away. "I need to tell you something," he says quietly, slipping into the bedroom past Billy to sit back down in bed. It had been meant to be a surprise, but Steve can see, now, that Billy is hurting. He thinks of the urgency in El's tone. He thinks of all the times that Billy has come back to Hawkins with him, how tense and silent he's been. Steve feels a little sick at his own ignorance. Vows to be better.

Billy looks a little cautious as he climbs back into bed, and Steve hates that. Hates how many reasons he always gives Billy to feel uncertain. Steve presses into his side, tangles their legs together.

"Harrington?" Billy asks, sounding a little unsure.

“We aren’t going back to Hawkins for Christmas,” Steve says immediately, cuts right to the chase, doesn’t hedge at all.

Billy’s breath hitches, “You don’t have--I can--you always--” but he doesn’t string the words together into a full sentence, which tells Steve more than the half-truth Billy was starting to say ever could.

“I planned it before you left,” Steve says. “It’s called operation SHC.”

“SHC?” Billy’s eyes are wide and he sounds--understandably, Steve supposed, confused.

“Steve Hosts Christmas. Dustin’s idea--the name. I thought--I wanted--everyone is--everyone who matters is coming here.” Steve still has a hard time saying the things that matter, but he’s working on it, pushes through the awkward phrasing until he says what he wants to say.

“Not--”

“Even Max,” Steve cuts in before Billy has the whole question out. “Especially Max. Susan thinks that she’s spending the week with Nancy.”

“We’re going to get arrested for kidnapping,” Billy murmurs, but Steve feels every inch of tension drain out of him. He’s so fucking glad El called.

“It’s fine,” Steve answers, untangling himself for long enough to turn the light off and dive back under the covers. “Dustin knows a good lawyer.”

“What the *fuck*?” Billy hisses, but Steve just grins in the darkness and fake snores loudly, pretending he’s already back asleep.

Eventually, Billy flops back down, drapes himself all over Steve. He’s always too hot like this, but Steve doesn’t really mind. Billy drools on his back. It’s kind of gross, but it’s ok.

~

“Billy!” Steve hisses, staring at the envelope in his hand. It’s

December 24th. “You were supposed to mail this *last week!*”

It’s a card for Officer Abaroa, who still works at the precinct down the street, and who also got a card for her birthday. Steve has never been so grateful for the intervention of a complete stranger as he is for her, for this woman who walked into the stupid little cafe where he works and delivered Billy to him, practically tied with a bow.

“Sorry,” Billy says, looking up from the book he’s reading on the couch. “I really thought I did.”

Steve flips him off and tugs on a pair of shoes, jogs down the ten million flights of stairs and around the corner to drop the card into the mailbox. Late is better than never, he figures. She’ll get it eventually.

He’s shoving his cold fingers into his armpits--he didn’t put a jacket on, figured he was just running around the corner--when the chaos he invited into their lives rolls up outside.

A car horn honks, there’s the sound of squealing wheels, a door slams, then Lucas’s voice, “*Holy shit!*” and Hopper’s voice, “Are you *crazy*? Have you driven a car before, Wheeler? Wait, don’t answer that, I don’t want to know.”

Steve turns around to see Dustin and Lucas climbing out of the back of Hopper’s truck, both of them balancing stacks and stacks of tupperware. Mike is standing with his arms crossed next to the driver’s side of a second car, glaring at Hopper with all the venom of an affronted teenager. Eleven stands at his shoulder, looking absolutely delighted while Will laughs into his arm and then pretends it’s a cough when Hopper turns the full force of his glare on him.

“There is no way you’re driving home,” Hopper says. “*Anyone* else can drive. A *dog* can drive. *El* can drive.”

“I drive fine,” Mike answers, sounding a little sulky.

“Dude, you almost killed everyone like, twelve thousand times and I wasn’t even in the same car as you!” Lucas says, adjusting his grip on the tupperware. “No way I’m driving back in your car. I’ll take my

chances with Dustin as my seat partner.”

“That was *fun*,” Eleven says, sounding as delighted as she looks.

Mike is parked on the curb again. Steve doesn’t know what he was thinking having them all here. Probably they are all going to die.

“Hi,” he says, a little helplessly, and then the full force of this family who has clearly adopted him turns on him.

“Hi honey,” Joyce says, getting to him first. She kisses his cheek and then steps back, the warmest smile he has ever seen on her face. “You look wonderful. I like this hair,” she tugs on a strand of it near his ear, smiling even brighter when he blushes. “Will,” she calls, “Do you need help with the food?”

“I’m fine, mom,” Will answers, and Steve turns around and thinks probably he’s not, because the stack of tupperware he’s carrying is definitely taller than he is.

“How much food did you guys bring?” Steve asks, a little wide eyed.

Hopper comes up behind him and drops a hand on his shoulder, squeezing solemnly. “Not enough,” he says. “You should see these kids eat. They’re animals.”

“That’s rude!” Dustin says, sounding affronted as he wobbles up to Steve under the weight of probably eighty containers. “My mom didn’t want you to have to cook,” he explains, carefully balancing them all on one arm and holding his hand up for a high five. “She says you’re being very kind having us all over, and she wants to make sure that you also get to have fun,” he sounds like he’s quoting her verbatim. Steve slaps his palm against Dustin’s then has to dart forward to help adjust the tower of tupperware as they teeter.

“Nancy and Jonathan are right behind us,” Joyce says once the tower has been stabilized. “They had to leave a little bit after we did.”

“For stealth purposes,” Lucas chimes in. “Can we go up? It’s freezing.”

Steve jogs ahead of them to open the door and the kids--teenagers,

Jesus he's getting old--and all their precarious tupperware towers thunder up the stairs into the building. Hopper is right behind them, shouting directions and warnings. Joyce smiles warmly at Steve and squeezes his arm again, turning back to the cars thoughtfully. "I hope they got everything," she says, but when she turns back around she's looking past him.

"Hello, Billy," Joyce says. She speaks softly and warmly to him, like she always does, like she knows too much would startle him.

"Hi," Billy answers, and Steve turns and looks at Billy, in socks, standing huddled in the doorway of their building. Billy in Steve's mind is either too cocky for his own good, all swagger and hip-first movement, all bedroom eyes or even soft at the edges like he is in bed at night. The Billy framed in the doorway is neither of those things. He looks nervous, a little domestic, and impossibly small. Steve's heart aches with the urge to reach out and bundle him into a hug, to protect him.

Joyce is still smiling, "Merry Christmas Eve, sweetheart," she says. "Thank you so much for letting us all come visit. I haven't been on a real trip to the city in a long time." She walks up the steps and stops in front of Billy, cups his cheek once like she had Steve's, and says something quietly to him that Steve can't hear. "I'll see you both upstairs," she says, disappearing inside.

"What did we get ourselves into?" Steve asks, walking up the front steps to stand with Billy at the door. "It's going to be *so loud*."

"We didn't get ourselves into anything, Harrington," Billy reminds him. "We could have had a nice quiet Christmas in Hawkins. You being an awkward loser, me being traumatized and angry, but no, you invited all your termites here instead."

Steve turns to look at him, eyes wide and an apology on the tip of his tongue, before he sees the shit eating grin on Billy's face. "Jesus," Steve says, one hand against his chest. "Don't fucking do that to me. I just had a heart attack."

"I don't think you're supposed to say *Jesus* like that on Christmas Eve," Billy informs him primly, sounding a little like Nancy.

“Whatever, lets go upstairs,” Steve says, heaving a sigh and feeling very put upon. “Our fate awaits us.”

Billy shifts his weight and looks back out at the street. “I’m going to wait for Max,” he says. “I’ll see you upstairs in a bit. Send a messenger if a termite starts eating you alive.”

“Ok,” Steve says, looking at Billy for a long second. He crowds him back into the shadow of the building’s entrance, looks around quickly for any prying eyes, and presses a quick, soft kiss to Billy’s lips. “See you soon. Tell Nancy she better come right upstairs. We’re going to need adult supervision.”

Billy grips Steve’s arm and Steve stills, standing close enough he can feel Billy exhale. “I love you,” Billy says, so quietly Steve has to duck his head to hear him.

“I love you too,” Steve whispers back.

“Steve,” comes Dustin’s voice, loud and a little panicked, “Where do you keep the towels? I spilled--”

Steve is running up the stairs before he even knows what Dustin spilled. Jesus, how does Joyce host them all so often? There’s no way the apartment is going to make it through the next forty eight hours.

~

“And everyone is going to take at least four brussels sprouts,” Joyce is saying. Everyone groans, but the look she pins them with brokers no argument.

It’s Christmas Eve night, and all the furniture in the living room has been pushed against the walls. They are--all of them--seated in a lumpy circle on the floor, on pillows and folded up blankets, with glasses of wine and bottles of beer and cups of soda set carefully on hardwood floors. Nancy lit candles and put them up on all the flat surfaces she could find and the whole apartment glows from that and the Christmas lights. Everything, Steve thinks, looks kind of warm.

Steve accepts the bowl of brussels sprouts first, scoops a huge spoonful onto his plate--he’s something of a convert and honestly

enjoys the stupid things--before he hands them off to Billy. Even Hopper seems loathe to disobey the tone in Joyce's voice. He carefully scoops exactly four of the smallest brussels sprouts Steve thinks have ever existed onto his plate.

Eleven spoons her four onto her plate, smiles wickedly, and then floats them all over to Billy's plate. They all stare at her for a second, and she pops a potato into her mouth. "Joyce said take," she explains around the potato. "I *took*."

Will is hiding a laugh in a cough again, and Jonathan elbows him solidly in the side, but he's laughing too. Joyce rolls her eyes. "Teenagers," she says, helplessly. "What did I do to end up with so many consecutive years of *teenagers*?"

It's a great question, Steve thinks, looking around at this circle of his family. He makes eye contact with Eleven and eats a sprout very pointedly. She wrinkles her nose and sticks her tongue out. Teenagers are a lot to deal with, and Joyce has had teenagers in her life, invading her home, for a very long time. It makes him a little sad to think of the next four years, when he'll be old and they'll all be old too. No more teenagers or kids to make life loud and a little silly.

"You're thinking too hard," Nancy whispers in his ear, leaning into his side. "It can't be good for you."

Steve turns his head and kisses her temple, spontaneous and feeling very full of love. To his left, he can see Max is placing all her brussels sprouts on Billy's plate, taking advantage of Joyce's distracted conversation with Mike about the appropriate use of turn signals. Billy's pretending like he doesn't notice, but Steve knows that he does because he eats every single one of Max's brussels sprouts first, so that when Joyce looks back over it seems like nothing has changed. "You're welcome, Maxine," Steve hears Billy say, and he turns to look at her just in time to see the brilliant smile Max offers in return.

"How come no one will eat my brussels sprouts?" Dustin asks, looking forlornly at his plate, a pout edging at his lips.

"Oh for fucks sake," Steve says and holds his plate out. Dustin grins, purrs, scoops them all onto the pile Steve already has. Steve stares at

the mountain of brussels sprouts and sighs.

"Thanks, Steve-o. You're the best," Dustin says, and it's joking, but also a little bit honest.

"Anything for you, bud," Steve says, also joking, also honest.

Dustin beams at him.

"Sharing is caring," Lucas announces and promptly dumps all of his brussels sprouts onto Dustin's plate. Dustin's face falls. Steve is such a sucker, he's so whipped, because he sticks his plate back out and lets Dustin scoop the new additions onto his plate, too.

In the end, only Steve, Joyce, and Billy end up eating the brussels sprouts. Even Nancy gives up, passing hers to Jonathan, who dumps them on Will's plate, who looks beseechingly at Eleven until the vegetables end up evenly split between Billy and Steve. "This isn't what I had in mind," Joyce says, but she's laughing. "Next year I'm telling you all to *eat* them."

"That gives us time to strategize," Will says sweetly, all innocent smile and batting eyelashes.

Joyce turns to Hopper, "I was a good mother," she says sadly, "How did I get such terrible children?" but she's still smiling, something fond in the way she looks at Hopper and then back around the room.

Except for his *you're welcome* to Max, Billy's mostly been silent. Steve scoots closer, letting their knees bump together. When everyone is distracted by Dustin nearly knocking over Nancy's wine and Eleven saving the day, he presses a quick kiss to Billy's shoulder. "All right?" he murmurs into Billy's ear, watching with growing horror as Dustin nearly upends the glass a second time and everyone gasps.

Billy turns to look at him and his eyes are wide and warm and his smile is so soft. Steve is going to shatter right here into a million pieces under his gaze. "I've never had a holiday like this," Billy says. "In a place that's home."

"Baby," Steve says, soft and private, "Every holiday can be like this," and he says it like a promise.

“Ooooh,” Lucas says, and Steve turns in time to see him looking at Max, his hands clasped together, “Baby, would you pass me the salt?”

“Fuck off, Lucas,” Max says, rolling her eyes. “I’ll break your nose.”

Billy looks at Steve, puts a hand over his heart and says, “I’m so proud of her.”

“They grow up so fast,” Steve agrees.

Hopper chokes on his beer.

~

It’s just past four in the morning and Steve is wide awake. It probably has something to do with the truly incredible amount of food he ate. It probably also has something to do with the sound of snoring teenage boys a foot to his left.

Sleeping arrangements had been tricky. Steve’s parents had donated an additional air mattress to the cause. Hopper and Joyce are in the bedroom, obviously, on clean sheets. Steve had spent two days at the laundromat freaking out about matching pillowcases, but he thinks it was worth it. Eleven and Max are curled up on their own air mattress several feet away. Billy and Steve are on the couch, pressed together so tightly it’s almost uncomfortable, but Steve’s had worse nights, honestly.

The snoring comes from the air mattress between the girls and the couch, where Will, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin are sprawled in various stages of almost cuddling slumber. All four of them snore. Loudly. Steve is debating the pros and cons of suffocating them in their sleep.

“Stop moving,” Billy mumbles. Steve lifts his head to look at him. “I *said* stop moving,” Billy says, but he opens his eyes anyway.

“Sorry,” Steve whispers. “I can’t sleep.”

“So I also *have to* be awake, princess?” Billy asks. He’s rolling his eyes, but he shifts so that they’re both almost sitting. It’s more comfortable than the weird press of their bodies trying to lie down. Steve tucks his head against Billy’s shoulder. Billy’s arms settle

around his waist.

“Merry Christmas,” Steve whispers.

“Merry Christmas,” Billy answers, rubbing circles into the small of Steve’s back.

It’s a different kind of Christmas than Steve is used to. For one, usually there’s less snoring, and more space in his parents’ wide and empty house. Usually there are aunts and uncles to greet. Usually there is a big, fancy dinner with expensive china and crystal glasses. Usually his mother fusses and his dad tries to approximate a normal conversation with him. At least two plates get broken once everyone gets a little drunk.

This feels more delicate than that, the darkness of the living room broken by the lights on the tree--Eleven had insisted it be lit all night--and the silence of their space broken by the sounds of the city outside and the four snoring boys in the middle of the room. Billy’s arms are warm around Steve’s waist. This is a better angle for Steve--hopefully for Billy too--and this apartment is *theirs*. There are no memories here other than the ones they have made, no fights but the ones they have made up after, no scars except that one spot where Steve had dragged a bookcase wrong and scratched the floor.

There is just them. Their family. Their home.

In a few hours, Steve will be woken up by loud and needy teenagers. He will make waffles--not pancakes, which is what he always has when he’s at his parents’ house. There will be orange juice and champagne for the grown ups and probably a little for the kids--teenagers--who have perfected their puppy eyes and strategic demands for access to alcohol in a way that’s lulled all of the adults involved into a false sense of security.

In a few hours, there will be noise and laughter and wrapping paper strewn everywhere. For now though, there is just the tree, the snoring teenagers, Max and Eleven sleeping soundly, Joyce and Hopper in the bedroom.

Steve and Billy. On their couch. In their home.

A year is a long time, Steve thinks as he drifts off to sleep. He's thrilled that they'll have so many more of them.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so much for coming on this weird, 3+ years into the future ride with me. The response to this has been truly mind-blowing and I appreciate you all so much. Thanks for putting up with all my commas.

Come hang on tumblr!! This is the last planned piece of this verse for a while, but I love prompts and also just generally I'm freaking out about these two.

Author's Note:

lymricks.tumblr.com come hang out with me and scream about these two. I also post about The West Wing a lot, apparently.